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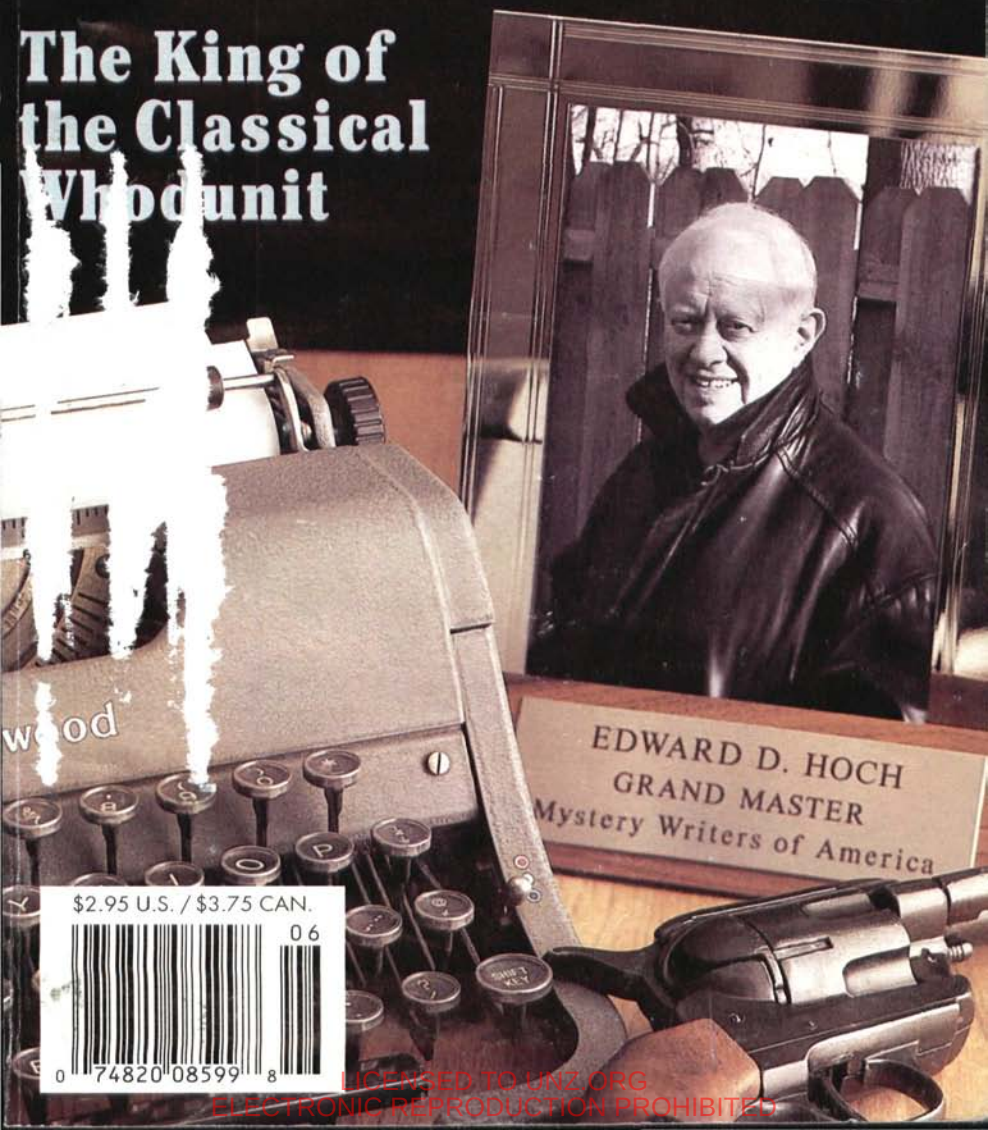

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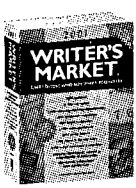

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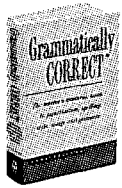

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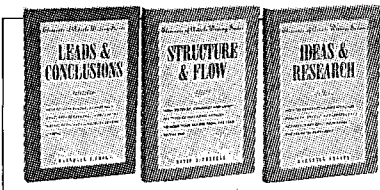

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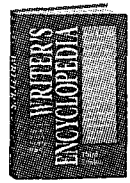

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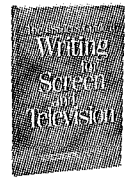

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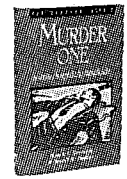

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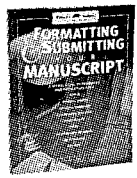

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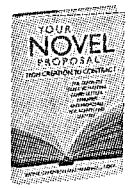

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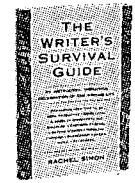

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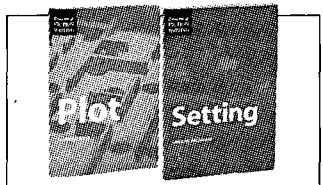

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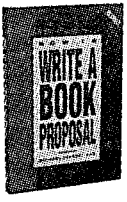

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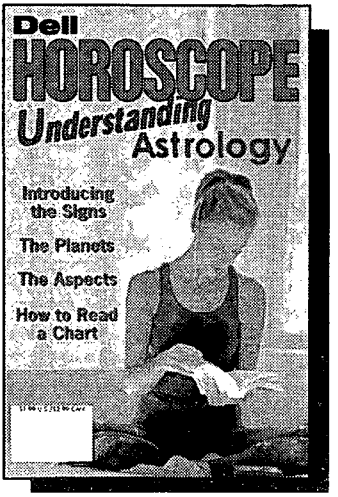

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Art by June Levine

CIRCUS IN THE SKY

by Edward D. Hoch

Her name was Carpathia, or at least that was her professional name on the posters for the Breen Brothers Circus. *The Beauteous Carpathia, Tamer of Lions and the Human Animal! Live! In Person!* I was a young man in my mid twenties, working for a month as a computer programmer in an unfamiliar city far from my home office, staying in a drab hotel room for which the company paid. I hadn't seen a circus since my childhood in the Midwest, and it seemed as good a way as any to pass another boring evening. After two weeks I'd exhausted all the downtown entertainment possibilities the city had to offer.

This was the end of the century and circuses no longer played in big tops set up along the railroad tracks in cities like Omaha and Des Moines. Now they were arena events, competing with rock stars and ice shows, hockey and wrestling for the best dates. The Breen Brothers Circus had come into the Memorial Arena during the third week in May, before children and their parents had time to scatter on their summer vacations. I went to the Wednesday evening performance, in an off-and-on drizzle, on a night when

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some of the city's prominent politicians and businessmen cavorted in clown makeup before the real acts came on.

But the true stars of the show for me weren't the clowns or bareback riders or high-wire acts, but Carpathia and her lions. I sat there through the first twenty minutes waiting impatiently for her appearance in Vegas-style spangled tights and feathery headdress, as shown on the poster. Surely no one could tame lions in such a costume, but when Carpathia made her spectacular entrance she was wearing just that, complete with high heels. She circled the arena once, heavily made-up, waving and throwing trinkets to the crowd, then retreated briefly to change into her working clothes. During her absence, the roustabouts were busy erecting an animal cage in the center ring. When she returned, wearing the traditional safari costume of khaki shorts, shirt, and pith helmet, the crowd went wild. Even one of the amateur clowns ran up to her with a bouquet of flowers, but she pushed him roughly aside.

"'Circus in the Sky' grew out of a Dr. Sam Hawthorne parody by Jon L. Breen published in *EQMM* in 11/79 ('The Problem of the Vanishing Town')," Ed Hoch told *EQMM*. "On the first page, one sentence reads, 'And I told you, didn't I, about the clown from the circus who was mauled by a lion on the fifth floor of the Northsouth Hotel when the lion was in his cage five blocks away.' The hotel became an office building, but here's my solution." †

She entered the cage as if it were just another day at the office, and almost at once three full-grown male lions were released into it. They growled convincingly, but were no match for Carpathia. Using a chair and whip, she quickly cowed the beasts and placed them on their proper pedestals. The spectators cheered when one of the big cats jumped through a hoop at her command. Carpathia's quarter-hour act was far too short for me, and the remainder of the show seemed bland by comparison. As I left the arena, wanting more, I spotted her in a heated conversation with one of the clowns. They almost seemed to be arguing about something. Finally the clown turned away, abruptly ending the conversation.

Across the river from the Memorial Arena, there was a late-night restaurant named Hale Eddy after a small natural whirlpool in the water at that point. As the circus crowds scattered to their cars, I strolled over the bridge. I was working this month in one of the several office buildings grouped there, developing a new computer program for a company that installed security systems. Sometimes when I worked nights I grabbed a sandwich and beer at Hale Eddy to take back to the office. Since the circus crowd had been made up mainly of family groups, there

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were few others in the place when I arrived. I ordered a drink and took it to a table by the window where I could watch the lights on the whirlpool below. It wasn't much, but as one of my coworkers had remarked, it was better than watching paint dry.

I'd been there about an hour, watching the eddy and nursing a second drink, when Carpathia came in. I recognized her at once, even though she was wearing a light summer raincoat with its collar turned up. She sat at the table next to me and ordered a glass of white wine. I thought she looked nervous, but perhaps that was her normal reaction after spending fifteen minutes in a cage with three lions.

It took me nearly that long to work up my courage and say, "I enjoyed your performance tonight."

She looked up, surprised that I'd spoken, and said, "Thanks."

"Is it still raining out?" I asked, figuring the weather was always a good icebreaker.

"Just a little. Is this the rainy season here?"

I shrugged. "I'm a visitor like yourself, in town for a month."

She laughed, a pleasant, melodic sound. "I wish I could stay somewhere for a month at a time. I wasn't cut out for circus life. Or not the travel, at least. I love the animals."

We chatted about some of the other cities the circus had visited and finally I invited her to join me at my table. "Could I buy you another glass of wine?"

Her hesitation was brief. "Sure, just one more and I'm finished for the night."

Close up, her face had a natural beauty that hardly needed the garish makeup she'd worn for her grand entrance. Seeing her like this, without the chair and the whip and the makeup, she seemed oddly defenseless. I had a young man's fantasy that I could say a few words and lead her out of there to my hotel room.

The drinks came and we were settling in for some casual conversation. "How did you ever get to be a lion tamer?" I asked.

I could tell from the sudden gleam in her eye that she had a witty answer she'd used before, but I never got to hear it. At that moment two men wearing navy blue raincoats entered the Hale Eddy and made directly for our table. "Miss Carpathia?" the taller one asked. He had thinning gray hair and a look of being in charge.

She raised her head slowly and peered at him. "Yes?"

"I'm Detective Sergeant Frazier," he said, showing his badge and ID. "This is my partner, Detective Isaacs. We're investigating a suspicious death in the office building across the street. We'd like your help in identifying the body."

Carpathia frowned, shaking her head. "I don't understand. I don't know anyone in that building."

"You visited an office on the seventeenth floor a half-hour ago

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and saw a lawyer named Richard Strong there."

"You're mistaken," she insisted. "I've been here with this gentleman for the past hour."

That was certainly no better than a half-truth, but I saw no reason to correct her just then. "You'd better both come along," the detective said. "This is serious."

I paid the check and we followed the two detectives across the street to the Granite Building. It was next to the one in which I'd been working for the past couple of weeks, but I'd never been inside. I saw now that a couple of police cars, a technical-unit truck, and a morgue wagon were parked in front. Neither of us spoke as the detectives escorted us past the security guard and into the elevator.

On the seventeenth floor Sergeant Frazier led us past a police photographer and several others, through the reception room of a law firm, and into a large corner office. A dead man in the remains of a business suit lay on the floor in the center of the room. There was clown makeup on his face, and blood had obviously mingled with the wide red grease-paint lips. Both face and suit had been shredded by bloody claw marks, but there was little blood and no sign of a struggle.

It was as if a lion had appeared from nowhere, killed him, and then vanished.

"Do you wish to make a statement, Miss Carpathia?" Frazier asked after we'd had a chance to recover from the shock.

We were in one of the office conference rooms down the hall from the crime scene. She sighed, not looking my way, and said, "Carpathia is my professional name. My real name is Mimi Gothery."

"How well did you know the deceased?"

"Not at all. He was one of the businessmen acting as clowns at tonight's performance." She made a disgusted face. "He tried to push some flowers on me during the performance. Later he gave me his business card and invited me up here for a drink."

"The lobby security guard, Walt Nealy, says you went up in the elevator to see Strong and left shortly afterward. He watched you cross the street to the Hale Eddy. Then he decided to phone up to Strong's office to be sure everything was all right. When there was no answer he called us."

"I went up to his office, but the place was dark and there didn't seem to be anybody there. I came right back down." Her voice was nervous and defensive.

Sergeant Frazier was making notes. "Why would you come here if you didn't know him?"

Carpathia (I still thought of her by that name) was drumming her nails on the conference table. "I should tell you how these things work. When Breen Brothers goes into a city, our advance man tries

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to line up prominent citizens to appear as clowns for one night's performance. Sometimes there's a charity tie-in. You'd be surprised how easy it is to recruit politicians and lawyers and businessmen. I guess everyone wants to be a clown. Even our boss, Charlie, puts on a polka-dot clown suit and makeup. He called on Strong and the others the day we got in, to line up their appearance tonight."

The detective turned his attention to me. "Is that your story, too? You want to be a clown?"

I identified myself and explained that I'd seen Carpathia performing at the circus. "When she sat down at the next table in Hale Eddy, naturally I spoke to her."

"I'll want to interview you both separately," he told us. "But I have one more question for you now, miss. What was your reason for coming up here to Richard Strong's office tonight?"

"Charlie wanted us to be friendly with the amateur clowns. It's good for business. I pushed him away earlier when he tried to give me flowers, and when he invited me for a drink Charlie said I had to go."

"Here in his office, late at night?"

"He said there'd be other people. When I saw there weren't, I took off fast."

"Do you have any idea what could have caused those claw marks on his face and body?"

"No, except that it wasn't one of my cats. Or maybe you think I turn into a lion on nights when the moon is full."

The detective closed his notebook. "All right, Miss Carpathia, or Gothery. If you'll just wait in the next room I want to take a statement from your friend here."

When we were alone he said, "I'll be frank with you, sir. I don't think you're directly involved in what happened here, but you're an important witness. I expect truthful answers to my questions if you want to stay out of trouble. How long was that woman with you at the Hale Eddy?"

"Maybe twenty minutes," I admitted. "But she was sitting there at least ten minutes before I spoke to her. You can't think she had anything to do with his murder!"

"That's exactly what I think. She went there for some sort of assignation with the victim. Things got out of hand and she defended herself, perhaps with one of those clawed garden tools."

"Which she just happened to have in her pocket? Be reasonable, Sergeant! If she'd killed him, why would she remain in the area, crossing the street to have a drink at the Hale Eddy?"

But Frazier had an answer for that, too. "Because she wanted to dispose of the murder weapon by throwing it into the whirlpool."

"How could she have struggled with Strong and clawed him with that weapon without getting blood on her clothes? Or for that

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matter, without getting clown makeup on her?"

"She might have cleaned it off. We'll examine her clothes for blood and grease paint. Meanwhile, will you be in town for the near future?"

"My work here ends in two weeks. I'll be here till then."

"Good! We'll probably want to talk with you again."

I waited downstairs for Carpathia, hoping they wouldn't bring her out in handcuffs. The lobby security guard had given up any attempt at keeping track of the police comings and goings. "They've been in and out for the past hour," he grumbled.

"Are you Walt Nealy, the man who phoned the police?"

"That's me, last time I looked." He gave a little giggle. "Usually nothing happens around here at night."

"Did you see Richard Strong go up before the young woman arrived?"

"Yeah, about twenty minutes before, just after ten. He still had that clown makeup on, with those thick purple lips and white cheeks. I wouldn't have recognized him if he didn't show his ID. See?" He showed us his ledger. "He went up at ten-oh-five and she came in at ten twenty-two."

"Was she alone?"

"Sure."

"And she left alone? No one else left the building?"

"Just her," he confirmed. "I watched her walk across to the Hale Eddy."

"She didn't have a lion with her?"

The security guard giggled again. "What do you think?"

I was still waiting forty-five minutes later when Carpathia finally appeared. She seemed tired and nervous, surprised to see me there. "How'd it go?" I asked.

"Terrible! They think I killed him! I'm lucky they didn't lock me up."

"How about a drink across the street?"

"Isn't that where it all started?"

"We can't be that unlucky twice in one night."

"One drink," she agreed.

We took the same table overlooking the river, and the waiter remembered us. This time she ordered scotch and water, and I did the same. "I saw you talking to a clown after the performance," I told her. "Was that Strong?"

She shook her head. "That was my boss, Charlie Craft. He loves being a clown, especially at shows when we have amateur clowns from the community. He always dresses up and joins them. He saw me push Strong's flowers away earlier and that upset him. He said I had to go have a drink with Strong after the show."

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"Why did you push the flowers away?"

"I could smell the liquor on his breath. I don't care what sort of a big deal he is. You don't get liquored up to entertain kids."

"But you still agreed to go up to his office."

She shrugged. "There are some things you have to do if you want to keep your job. Even lion tamers can be replaced. I didn't waste any time when I saw the office was dark, though. I turned around and went right back down."

"The guard said Strong went up ahead of you."

"I don't know where he was hiding." She finished her drink quickly and stood up. "Thanks. I've really got to go now."

I jotted down the number of my office phone on the back of a business card. "Call me if I can help in any way."

"Thanks. We'll be out of here after three nights and I hope that's the end of it."

But it wasn't the end. The killing of Richard Strong was big news in the morning paper, and that afternoon Carpathia phoned me at the office. "That detective just came by with bad news, impossible news! They've been here checking the claws of my lions! The official cause of death was a heart attack, but they say Gus was responsible for his death."

"Gus?"

"One of the lions. They examined the claw marks on the body and found that one claw seemed broken. Gus has a broken claw just like it."

"But that's crazy! Everyone knows you didn't walk across that bridge last night with a lion on a leash."

"The office building has a freight elevator around back. Sergeant Frazier says I could have brought Gus in a van, parked him around back, and then entered the building and unlocked the back door."

"Does he expect anyone to believe that?"

She was sounding desperate. "I told him I wasn't in the building more than five minutes. In that time they think I opened the back door, took Gus up in the freight elevator, killed Strong, returned the lion to the van, and left the building. It's just impossible."

"Have they actually arrested you yet?"

"Not yet, but I can't leave town with the show after Saturday's performance. I have to stay until their investigation is complete."

I stared at the computer screen in front of me, trying to calculate how much longer my work would take. "Where are you now?"

"At the arena. We have a matinée today."

"I'll see you there in an hour. Try to be at the lions' cages."

The afternoon show was still in progress when I walked across the bridge to the Memorial Arena, but I knew Carpathia's lion act would be finished. The acrobats and clowns had come and gone,

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and the bareback riders had almost finished the penultimate act. I made my way down the ramp to the lower level, where the animals were kept between performances. Carpathia was standing near one of the cages, looking somber. "This is Gus," she told me. Reaching between the bars, she gently lifted a paw and showed me his broken claw. "That bastard Charlie wouldn't let me use him in the act this afternoon. Says he's a murder suspect."

"Well, I suppose he is. If anything happened to you after Strong's killing, your boss would be in big trouble."

She lowered her voice. "This is him now."

We were joined by a clown in full makeup, complete with fright wig and baggy polka-dot clown suit. "Who's this?" he asked Carpathia, jabbing a finger in my direction.

She introduced me and then said, "This is Charlie Craft. He runs the place—ringmaster, clown, part owner."

"With the Breen Brothers?" I asked him.

"They sold the name years ago. I think they're in California now, running a winery." He eyed me carefully as he removed his red plastic nose and started peeling off his wig. "You a cop?"

"Hardly! I'm a computer programmer. I happened to be having a drink with Carpathia last night when the police found her at the Hale Eddy."

"Ha! You're not the first one to try that! She's a lovely young lady."

Carpathia seemed embarrassed by our talk. "Look, I need a way out of this. You guys aren't helping."

Charlie Craft was rubbing the purple grease paint from his lips. "If they try to arrest you the case will be laughed out of court. Nobody walks along a city street with a full-grown lion without being seen, even at night."

"That detective, Frazier, has it all worked out. I drove Gus there in the circus van and took him up in the freight elevator, returning him the same way after he killed Strong. They're checking the van for hairs now."

Craft gave a snort. "They won't find a thing."

"Don't be too sure, Charlie. Remember the week before last when I took a lion to the parking lot of the children's hospital in Nashville? I used the van to do that."

"Look here," I said, trying to be logical about it. "We need to draw up a timeline for last night, to prove you couldn't have done it."

Craft finished wiping off the white greasepaint around his eyes and I had my first real look at a handsome man in his forties, of average height and build. The abandoned clown suit had given way to a sport shirt and trousers. He produced a pair of glasses from the shirt pocket. "Clowns don't wear glasses," he explained. "We get batted around too much." He picked up a clipboard and pencil, passing them to me. "For your timeline."

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"All right. What time did the performance start?"

"Seven-thirty. We don't like to keep the kiddies up too late."

I started writing. "Richard Strong and the other amateur clowns were here then?"

"Sure, for the opening parade."

"Was Strong acting normal?"

"He was half in the bag," Carpathia told me. "That's why I pushed him away when he tried to give me the flowers. His breath almost floored me."

"If I remember correctly, you came on in your feathers and spangles around ten to eight, then went off for a costume change while the roustabouts erected the cage."

"She was in the cage from eight to eight-fifteen," Charlie Craft confirmed, wiping away the last of the white grease paint from around his eyes. "We have these things timed to the minute. We try to end the show by nine-thirty."

"I saw you two talking, or arguing, as I was leaving."

Craft nodded, with a sideways glance at Carpathia. "Strong had invited her to his office for a drink and I told her she should go. We need community support in cities like this. The amateur clowns are important to our box office."

"I told him I wouldn't do it," she said. "I stormed out of there and walked the streets for about forty-five minutes. Finally I decided I had to show up if I wanted to keep my job. I just prayed he'd be gone. When I found the office dark I went back downstairs."

"You didn't try the door?"

"No, I— Well, it was unlocked, but I wasn't going in there in the dark. I just figured he went home and forgot to lock up because he'd been drinking."

"Frazier thinks she drove the lion to the back entrance by the freight elevator, entered through the front, brought Gus up in the elevator, and let him kill Strong. Ever hear of anything so wild?"

"The timing doesn't seem possible," I admitted. "And there are lots easier ways of killing someone."

"I'm ready to swear in court that Gus never left his cage last night. And I've got a witness." He called to a sandy-haired young man who was cleaning the cages. "Wayne, wasn't Gus in his cage after last night's performance?"

"Sure was, Mr. Craft."

"You were here every minute?" I asked.

"I was in and out," Wayne answered, "but one of us was around all the time."

"Did Carpathia return after the performance?"

"I didn't see her."

"What about the circus van?" I asked. "Could she have taken it?"

"I have the only set of keys," Charlie Craft said. "Sometimes she

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borrows them, but not last night."

"Maybe you drove the lion up there."

Wayne laughed at that. "Mr. Craft wouldn't handle those cats for a million bucks! Besides, I just told you the lions never went anywhere last night."

"All right," I said finally, folding my timeline and slipping it into a pocket.

"What now?" Carpathia asked.

"I don't know."

I thought about questioning the security guard, Nealy, again but there seemed little point to it. He might have followed Richard Strong upstairs and killed him, but he certainly couldn't have used Gus as a murder weapon. I told Carpathia I was going for a walk and headed back across the bridge to my office. When I was halfway across I was attracted again by Hale Eddy. The small whirlpool was the city's prime attraction, at least so far as I was concerned. I leaned on the railing and watched the water spinning around, forever spinning,

"You could watch it by the hour," a voice behind me said. It was Sergeant Frazier.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"This case was a lot simpler when I thought she'd tossed the murder weapon into the whirlpool."

I guess that's when it came to me, watching that water spin around. "They say whirlpools spin in the opposite direction south of the equator," I told him.

"Yeah. I've heard that."

"If you look at Richard Strong's death the other way around, it makes sense."

He frowned at me. "What other way around?"

"From the lion's viewpoint."

We were back at the circus that evening, Frazier and I, with his partner Isaacs bringing up the rear. When Carpathia came off after the closing parade, she hurried over. "Is he here to arrest me?" she asked, motioning toward Frazier.

"We'll see."

"What is it now?" Charlie Craft asked, strolling up in his clown outfit. "More questions?"

"Some answers, I hope," the sergeant told him. "Mr. Craft, before you remove your makeup I'd like you to meet Walt Nealy, the night security guard at the Granite Building." Right on cue, Isaacs stepped forward with Nealy.

"What is this?" Craft asked, his voice a bit tense.

"Mr. Nealy, take a good look at this clown. Could this have been the man who went up to Richard Strong's office at 10:05 last night?"

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The guard stared at Craft. "These clowns all look alike to me. He had Strong's ID card."

"But they're not all alike," I pointed out. "Each one has a distinctive style and coloring of makeup. When I saw Strong's body last night, his big clown lips were red, yet you told me the man you admitted had purple lips. I figured the light had been bad, but then this afternoon I watched Mr. Craft remove his makeup and he had purple grease paint on his lips."

"Yeah, you're right," Nealy decided, with a little giggle to hide his embarrassment. "This is the guy."

"But if Charlie went up there, what happened to him?" Carpathia asked. "And how did Strong get up to his office?"

Sergeant Frazier smiled, pointing to me. "Ask your friend here. He's an expert on the lion's viewpoint."

"I think after last night's performance a somewhat inebriated Strong wandered down to the lions' cages and decided he could tame them as easily as you, Carpathia. And we can guess how Gus reacted to that. Strong got clawed badly across the face and body for his trouble. That brought on a fatal heart attack. So Craft here was faced with a nightmare situation—one of the city's distinguished attorneys killed by a circus lion. He must have envisioned not only terrible publicity but million-dollar lawsuits as well. What to do? The only thing he could think of was to get the body away from here, back to Strong's office. You see, it wasn't the lion that came up in the freight elevator, it was Richard Strong's body."

"It was his own damn fault. I didn't kill him," Craft muttered, "and neither did Gus."

"But you loaded his body into the circus van, to which only you had the keys. Maybe Wayne or one of the other roustabouts helped you. You drove around the back of Strong's building, where you'd visited him earlier in the week, and parked the van by the freight elevator. Then you went through the lobby entrance, convincing Nealy you were Strong, and up in the elevator. You used Strong's key to unlock the office and then brought the body up on the freight elevator. The key and the ID card went back in his pocket. You turned out the office lights and returned to the van via the freight elevator. You couldn't lock the office door after you because the key was back in Strong's pocket."

"What about Carpathia's part in all this?" Frazier's partner asked.

"She had nothing to do with it. She'd told Charlie she wouldn't go up there and he had no reason to think she'd change her mind. He certainly wasn't trying to frame her, even though it worked out that way. He figured Strong's death would be attributed to a burglar with a knife or some sharp tool."

"What are you going to do to me?" Craft asked.

"The district attorney will decide on the charges," Frazier told him.

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"You have the right to remain silent and to have a lawyer present."

"I just want it wrapped up," he said. "All I did was move a body."

"That was enough."

Later, as we had a drink at the Hale Eddy, Carpathia asked, "Did you know I was innocent all along?"

"Sure," I answered gallantly. "The timing just wasn't right for you to have done it. And when I got thinking about it, there was little blood and no signs of a struggle in the office. That's when I decided Strong was killed somewhere else, and where else but at the circus?"

"You should have been a detective. What will you do now?"

I signaled the waiter for another drink. "Probably go to the circus every night until you leave town. Then I'll just sit here and stare at that damned whirlpool." ●

Edward D. Hoch Named Grand Master!

To be named Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America is to belong to a select group that includes the greatest writers in the genre, from classic mystery novelists such as Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon to contemporary leaders in the field such as Lawrence Block and Mary Higgins Clark. When the MWA chose Edward D. Hoch to receive the award this year, they admitted into this distinguished circle, for the first time, a writer who is primarily—indeed, almost exclusively—a short-story writer rather than a novelist.

In the late sixties and seventies Edward D. Hoch wrote five novels, one of which was commissioned by Ellery Queen and published under the Ellery Queen byline; his real life's work, however, is the brilliantly plotted short stories, 840 to date, that he produces for this and other magazines and for numerous anthologies. The number of Mr. Hoch's stories would not be remarkable in itself, for the genre has produced other prolific authors; it is the number combined with the extraordinarily high quality of the stories that tells us this is someone special—someone who has been gifted with a mind teeming with ideas, a knack for drawing readers into a tale, an ability to create a perfect plot structure, and a facility for developing characters readers want to see again and again.

In our novel-dominated era, it's virtually impossible for short-story writers to become household names. But in the case of Edward D. Hoch, word has somehow gotten out. He has a loyal following that numbers in the hundreds of thousands, and because he has reached so many readers, he has been able to exert an influence on the genre as a whole. His great contribution to the field (beyond providing untold hours of pleasure to fans around the world) has been to take the classical whodunit into the post-World War II period with its best conventions and expectations intact. A typical Hoch whodunit employs characters with all the ambivalence and complexity of motive that we associate with modern life within a structure that ensures a satisfying resolution to the story's conflicts and to the puzzle.

It's time Edward D. Hoch was recognized for his unparalleled contributions to mystery writing. *EQMM* applauds MWA for its wise choice for this year's Grand Master!

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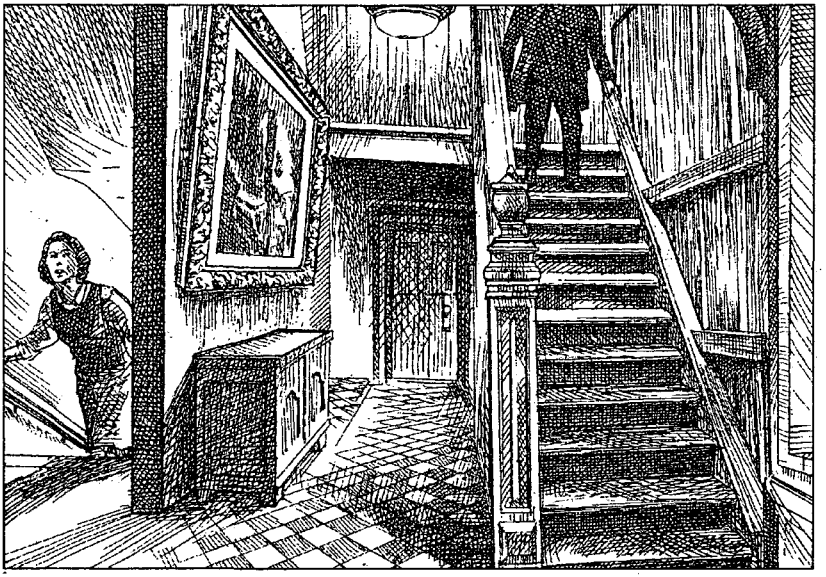

Art by Allen Davis

ONE OF US

by Keith Miles

"How long will he be staying?" she asked.

"Just for the night, Maisie."

"Is that all?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "Dave won't be around for long."

"Is that his name?"

"That's what you can call him."

"Right."

"Usual fee. Delivered by hand."

"Thank you, Mr. Rymer."

"I always pay well for good service."

"I know," she said with an appreciative smile. "Extremely well."

"You deserve it."

"I hope so."

"Dave will be there around three this afternoon."

"The room is all ready."

"Good. I'll be in touch." He was about to switch off his mobile phone when a thought struck him. "Oh, one thing, Maisie."

"Yes, Mr. Rymer?"

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"Watch him."

"Dave?"

"He needs careful handling. That's why I'm sending him to you."

"I understand."

The line went dead and she put down her own receiver. She glanced around the hall. The wallpaper was starting to fade slightly and the pattern was beginning to irritate her. A solution was at hand. Thanks to Clive Rymer, she could afford to have the hall redecorated now. It was his third phone call in a month. They were becoming more regular, and so were his generous fees. Rymer was the perfect employer. He always paid on time and in cash. Nobody else ever knew about their transactions.

Author Keith Miles also writes under the pseudonym Edward Marston, though that pen name is usually associated with the historical mystery subgenre and two series in particular, one set in the world of the Elizabethan theater and the other at the time of William the Conqueror's Domesday census. Mr. Miles was a teacher of both history and drama before turning full-time to fiction writing. His work for us has so far been contemporary and nonseries. †

It never occurred to Maisie Torrence that she was doing anything illegal. As far as she was concerned, all that she provided was accommodation for one or two people. They were invariably men and they only had the first name assigned to them by Rymer. If they worked for him, that was all she needed to know. Anonymous strangers could come and go as often as they liked. Maisie never asked any questions and never indulged in idle speculation. Her job was simply to feed, house, and nurture them. Sometimes, she merely offered them a hiding place. It all depended on whether they came to her before or after the event.

Usually, it was before. John had been the first, increasingly nervous as the day wore on, making silly jokes and calling for endless cups of coffee. Before he went off, John had given her an impulsive kiss on the cheek, a need to make contact rather than any gesture of affection. Maisie had seen the beads of sweat on his brow and smelled the whiskey on his breath. John was scared. It was not her business to wonder why. Steve, by contrast, had been as cool as a cucumber. He lay on his bed for hours, reading Danielle Steele with great concentration and drinking nothing but iced water. There was no hint of apprehension about him. No sweat, no stink, no impromptu kiss. Steve had gone off calmly and left the heady romantic novel in his room for Maisie. She gave it to Oxfam. It seemed the safest thing to do.

Musing on her brief history as a landlady, Maisie went back into

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the kitchen to finish her breakfast. Her tea was still hot, her toast still crisp. As she lowered herself into her chair, she reflected that there had been twelve in all. Twelve apostles and the Virgin Maisie. She laughed aloud. Whatever John, Steve, Tom, Vince, and the rest had been, they had no spiritual inclinations, nor could she lay any claims to chastity. Two children were living proof against such a pretense. Then there was Bernard, her ex-husband, not to mention the few close friends who had consoled her in the wake of his sudden departure from the marriage.

Most of all, of course, there was Roy. He was the most exciting man she had ever met. Maisie couldn't resist him even though she knew that she was breaking the rules. Roy had come to her afterwards. She could tell that. There was a glint of triumph in his eye and a sense of exhilaration about him. It was not long before Maisie shared that exhilaration. Roy was strong, sensual, and uninhibited, an inventive lover, demanding yet considerate, taking and giving pleasure with an ease she had never known before. Compared to Roy, the others were willing amateurs, nice men who cared for her too much really to let themselves go. Roy was special. They spent only two nights together, but each had been magical. Maisie wondered what his real name was.

Biting off a piece of toast, she remembered the fleeting conversation they had had as she lay in his arms for the last time. Roy was laconic. On the rare occasions when he did speak, his monosyllables came out in a slow Cockney accent. She had replayed the same piece of dialogue a hundred times.

"Maisie?" he had said.

"Yes?"

"This bloke of yours."

"Bernard?"

"That's him. Left you high and dry, did he?"

"I'm afraid so," she admitted, snuggling up to him, "but that's all in the past. I never even think about my ex-husband. Especially at a time like this."

"He was out of order."

"Forget about Bernard."

"Like me to do something about him?"

"My solicitor's already done the necessary."

Maisie had kissed him again and the conversation came to an abrupt end. It was only after Roy had left that she sifted through each detail of their time together. When she came to that last question of his, she recalled how casual his offer had been.

"Like me to do something about him?"

Roy was not talking about legal advice. He wanted to exact revenge on her behalf. Roy was ready to inflict some nameless punishment on Bernard. When she told him about her divorce, he

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listened in mute disapproval. There had been no warning signs. It had come out of the blue. Bernard had driven off early one morning to the sales conference and told her that he'd be back the next day. Instead of a husband, all that she got on the following morning was a terse note in the post to say that he had left her and would be sending a van to collect his things. Not a word of explanation, not the faintest hint of regret. Twenty years of marriage had been thrown contemptuously into the dustbin. Maisie had moved quickly from shock to disbelief, then on to a fierce anger. At that point, she would have been grateful to anybody to strike back at Bernard, but there was nobody like Roy to hand. Her anger slowly evaporated and dull resignation set in.

Wendy Edbrooke was behind it all. She was certain of that. Maisie had only met her husband's personal assistant once, but it was enough. The girl was ambitious. You could see that in the way that she dressed, spoke, and conducted herself. Everything was carefully gauged in order to impress her boss, Bernard Torrence, European sales director for the company, a handsome man with an easy charm who kept middle age at bay with a sensible diet and regular games of squash. He had taught Wendy Edbrooke to play squash. Other sports soon followed.

"Like me to do something about him?"

"My solicitor's already done the necessary."

Her reply to Roy had been naive but accurate. The legalities had been put in the hands of Norman Shiel, an elderly solicitor who specialized in divorce and who fought for his clients with the kind of urbane savagery that was required. Thanks to him, Maisie got the house, custody of the children, and a substantial financial settlement, but they did not offset the huge losses she endured. At one stroke, she lost her husband, her status, her self-confidence, and all of the friends she had made through Bernard. Since the children were on the point of leaving home—Peter to university, Vicky to an appointment at a hospital in Sunderland—she soon lost them as well. Suffering from depression, she even had to give up her job as secretary at a large comprehensive school.

So there she was at forty-five, hurt, lonely, and dispirited. Drawing on her capital, she slowly began to whittle it away. Out of boredom, she drifted in and out of a couple of short-term relationships that left her feeling worse than ever. Some of her friends claimed that divorce was a liberating experience; Maisie only found it humiliating. It made her wary of going into local shops. She feared that everyone would *know.* Shutting herself away in the house, she watched endless soap operas, identifying with the characters until they became the only people she could trust. Maisie Torrence was suffering.

It was then that Norman Shiel came back into her life. He was

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no mere divorce lawyer. He believed in after-sales service. Calling on her one day, he was disturbed to see how jaded she was and how neglected the house had become. Maisie was embarrassed by his visit, but he gradually won her confidence and she poured out her troubles to him. Shiel was a practical man. The first thing he advised her to do was to get a job, less for the income it might bring in than for the focus it would give. Her computer skills and secretarial experience were saleable assets. By way of a start, he arranged for his own firm to put a small amount of work her way, something which she could do at home in her own time. It was a profitable experiment.

Maisie responded with eagerness. When she contacted an agency, other work soon began to come in. She was quick, efficient, and professional. One of the bedrooms was converted into an office and she upgraded her computer. Maisie was soon working four or five days a week. The effect on her was dramatic. As her confidence was restored, her appearance improved markedly. She lost weight, changed her hairstyle, and bought new clothes. A woman came twice a week to clean the house. It was almost as if Norman Shiel had brought her back to life again. The solicitor watched her progress with interest. It was over a year later when he called on her again.

"How are you, Mrs. Torrence?" he asked politely.

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Shiel."

"You're certainly looking very well."

"Thank you."

"How's business?"

"Thriving," she said proudly. "I love working on my own. I never thought I'd have the discipline, but I do. And there's no hassle. Working at the school all those years was so stressful. It's so much easier now."

"Good." He glanced around. "Yet you're still alone, I see."

"Peter is in Edinburgh, so I don't see much of him, and Vicky has very little time off. Nurses work such terrible hours."

"I wasn't thinking of your children, Mrs. Torrence," he explained. "You're an attractive woman in the prime of life. I'd assumed that I wasn't the only man to notice that. By now, I rather thought you might have—"

"Oh no," she interrupted. "I'm too fond of my own company to share my life with anyone else. For the moment, anyway. Once bitten and all that. I have friends and we spend time together, but that's as far as it goes."

"Why have you never reverted to your maiden name?"

"I like to remind myself that I was once married. It's a good warning."

Norman Shiel laughed and exchanged niceties for a few minutes

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before working his way around to the real purpose of his visit. He studied her under bushy brows.

"You know, you really are a remarkable woman," he began.

"Am I?"

"I think so, Mrs. Torrence. Divorce is a bruising experience. Most women who go through it are either badly scarred or hopelessly embittered. You're neither. Yes," he continued, anticipating what she was about to say, "I know that you were a little shell-shocked at first, but that's only natural. The fact is that you've picked yourself up, dusted yourself off, and forged a new life for yourself. I admire you for it."

"You must take some of the credit, Mr. Shiel."

"Nonsense! I merely gave some advice."

"It was invaluable."

"Then perhaps you'd let me give you a little more," he said, taking a step closer. "You have a beautiful house here, Mrs. Torrence. A detached property, sitting on the best part of an acre and completely sheltered from the road. How many people in south London have that?"

"I only have it because Shiel and Monroe handled my divorce."

"Kind of you to say so."

"This house is my refuge."

"It could also be a source of income," he suggested. "Not that I'm advising you to turn it into a small hotel or anything like that. You value your privacy too much to do that. No, what I had in mind was an occasional—a very occasional—guest for a day or two. The truth is that I have a client who has to put people up in this area from time to time and who would pay handsomely for the privilege of using a house like yours."

"But there are dozens of hotels within easy driving distance."

"My client prefers his friends to have the personal touch."

"In what way?"

"He's looking for somewhere small and individual."

"Here?" asked Maisie in surprise.

"It's ideal. And so discreet."

"That's as may be, Mr. Shiel, but I wouldn't know how to look after guests. I mean, I've never had anyone staying here."

"You looked after a husband and two children."

"That's true!" she agreed ruefully.

"A guest would be far less trouble. And unlike your family, he'd pay."

Norman Shiel was persuasive. Every objection that Maisie had raised was overridden with bland assurances. The solicitor had given reliable advice in the past. There was no reason to doubt him now. By the time he was leaving, Shiel had turned a reluctant woman into a would-be landlady.

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"My client's name is Mr. Rymer," he said.
"How do I contact him?"
"He'll contact you, Mrs. Torrence."
"I see."
"Clive Rymer is ubiquitous. I never know quite where he is."
"What does he do?"
"He's a businessman."
"When will he call me?"
"When the time is right."
That was how it all began.

The extraordinary thing was that she never even met Clive Rymer. He always rang her, infrequently at first, on his mobile phone. Arrangements were made, accommodation was prepared, someone stayed at the house then left. Soon afterwards, an envelope would be pushed through her letterbox with the agreed fee. For the same amount of money, a room could have been taken at the Ritz Hotel, but Maisie did not complain. Having set her up in business, her solicitor had provided her with a lucrative sideline. It was almost three months after John's departure that Steve spent a night at the house. Tom did not show up for a further six weeks. The gaps between visitors were now narrowing, however. Maisie took it as a sign of approval.

She was too intelligent not to spot the obvious connections. Shortly after John disappeared, the local paper carried news of a warehouse robbery less than a mile from Maisie's home. Steve's presence in the area coincided with an arson attack in Brixton.

Tom, a quiet young man in a pinstripe suit, chose to stay under her roof on the day before a building society handed over sixty thousand pounds in cash to an armed intruder. Maisie turned a blind eye to it all. What they did in their own time was nothing to do with her. Ignorant of the truth, she accepted no responsibility for their actions. Not even in Roy's case. She might have helped to celebrate his crime—if, indeed, he had committed one—but she was no accomplice. Besides, she told herself, she was only acting on her solicitor's advice. Maisie's integrity was intact.

Clive Rymer's words reverberated in her ear.

"Watch him," he had cautioned.

"Dave?"

"He needs careful handling. That's why I'm sending him to you."

Maisie was both flattered and alerted, pleased that Rymer had such faith in her, but worried about her latest guest. Why did Dave need careful handling? What was wrong with the man? Would she be in any danger? If not to her, where else might Rymer have sent him? Did he have other discreet houses where he could place his friends? It was baffling. Though she had spoken with

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Clive Rymer a number of times, she knew him no better than at the start. His voice was clipped and educated. Maisie had the impression that she was talking to a professional man in his forties, brisk, courteous, and worldly. Would she ever get to meet the mysterious Clive Rymer? She had no direct means of contacting him. He had given her an emergency number, but she had no cause to use it. In any case, she was certain he would not be at the other end of the line. Rymer was not merely ubiquitous. He covered his tracks.

"He needs careful handling. That's why I'm sending him to you."

The cautionary note had been loud and clear. Dave was a potential problem. He was also the thirteenth guest to come through her door, and that might be a bad omen. Maisie made a conscious effort to shake off her anxieties. Whatever the situation, she would cope. She had coped with Geoff and Andy, the noisy pair who spent the whole evening playing cards and getting drunk. She had dealt firmly with Vince when he suggested that they watch the late-night porn channel on television together. And she had rescued poor, sad Harry when he had a violent attack of nerves on the verge of leaving her house. Maisie had nothing to fear. She could handle any situation.

When all was said and done, Dave was only there for one night.

"Mrs. Torrence?"

"Yes," she replied.

"My name is Dave."

"Oh, yes. I've been expecting you. Come on in."

"Thank you." He stepped into the hall. "Nice house."

"I hope you'll be comfortable here."

"I'm sure I will, Mrs. Torrence."

Dave was punctual. Arriving on the stroke of three, he dispelled all of her vestigial fears. Maisie had never seen anyone less threatening than the tall, thin, wiry individual in his forties who was standing outside her front door with a briefcase in his hand. Well groomed and immaculately dressed in a blue suit, Dave looked like an accountant who rang the bells at church on Sundays. Maisie showed him to his room and asked him what he would like for tea.

"I'm not really hungry, Mrs. Torrence," he said.

"You may be later on."

"Possibly. But for the time being, I'd rather be on my own, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," she said, moving to the door. "If you do want anything, just give me a call. I can easily rustle something up for you."

"Thank you."

He gave her a polite smile and closed the door after her. Maisie

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relaxed. Dave was patently innocuous. For the next six hours or so, she did not hear a sound from him. When he finally appeared, it was to request a cup of cocoa and a biscuit. It was all that he would touch. By ten o'clock, he was in bed. There was no light under the door. Maisie felt able to turn in herself not long afterwards.

She awoke to the sound of the shower in the bathroom. Dave seemed to be under the water for an inordinately long time. Putting on her dressing gown, Maisie went down to the kitchen to set out the breakfast things. Dave's repast was frugal. He allowed himself only a single piece of toast with his cup of coffee, then he retired to his room. When he reappeared, he was wearing a new tie and an air of quiet confidence. It was almost as if he were going off for an interview. Maisie escorted him to the front door.

"Goodbye, Dave," she said.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Torrence."

"It was so nice to have you here."

"Will you tell that to Mr. Rymer?" he asked.

"Of course. If you wish."

"I do wish." He looked at her with sudden intensity before extending a hand. After a pause, she shook it. "You've been very kind to me, Mrs. Torrence."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't have done more for you."

He gave a strange laugh, then let himself out of the house. She waved him off.

Maisie dismissed him from her mind. There were too many things to do. After putting the dirty crockery in the dishwasher, she went upstairs to have her morning bath and to think about the work that awaited her in her office. She did not hear the letterbox opening and shutting. When she next came downstairs, there was a brown envelope waiting for her on the doormat. Clive Rymer had paid her fee in full. As she counted the money out, Maisie wished that all of her guests could be like Dave. While in her home, he had been all but invisible. On her way back to the office, she glanced into the bedroom that he had used. Dave's passion for tidiness was clear. Everything was in its place. He had stripped the bed and neatly folded the sheets and blankets. He had even managed to get the wayward Monet print to stay in its proper position on the wall. Only one thing spoiled the overall effect: Lying halfway under the bed was an audiotape.

When she picked it up, Maisie saw that she was holding highlights from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde.* She was taken aback. Dave did not have the stamp of a romantic. Had he left it as a present for her? Or had he simply mislaid it? At all events, she would never see him again, so the tape was hers to dispose of. Oxfam would be the beneficiary again.

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A busy day left Maisie with no time to meditate on the business that had brought Dave to her house or on the signifance of Richard Wagner in his life. It was mid-evening before she eventually switched off her computer. Autumnal darkness was falling. A glass of wine revived her and she made herself a light meal, eating it off a tray in front of the television. A second glass of wine tasted even better than the first. She was still considering an early night when the doorbell rang. Not expecting visitors, Maisie was circumspect, switching on the porch light and applying her eye to the spyhole in the front door. She was surprised to see Dave standing meekly outside. He was carrying his briefcase. Without even thinking, Maisie opened the door to him.

"Hello, Mrs. Torrence," he said apologetically. "I'm so sorry to trouble you, but I'm afraid that I left something behind this morning."

"Yes," she replied. "I found the tape."

"That can stay here. There's something else I forgot to take. May I come in?"

"Of course." She stood aside to admit him. "What was it?"

"I'll soon find it."

Before she could stop him, he went bounding up the stairs. Maisie shut the front door and went after him, but there was no sign of him in the bedroom where he had slept.

"Where are you?" she called.

"In your bedroom," he answered.

Maisie flushed. "What on earth are you doing in there?"

She went bustling into the room to confront him, but it was a very different Dave from the man who had stayed with her on the previous night. Back to the door, he cut off her exit. The polite manner had given way to a quiet desperation. Maisie was alarmed.

"Get out!" she ordered.

"You don't mean that," he said softly. "Be fair. I was patient. I was very patient. I wanted you last night but the job had to come first. Now that it's over, there's nothing to stop us."

"Oh, yes, there is!"

"Maisie," he cooed.

"I'm Mrs. Torrence to you, and this is my house."

"You did say you were sorry you couldn't have done more for me. Well, now you can." He beamed at her. "Have you listened to the tape yet?"

"No."

He was hurt. "Why not?"

"Because I don't like opera."

"Everybody likes a love story. Wait until you hear it."

"Take your tape and get out of here."

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"But I thought we'd listen to it together. In bed."

"Never!"

It was a mistake to get so close to him. Dave's hand shot out to grab her wrist. Pulling her to him, he got hold of her in a bear hug and gave her a first slobbering kiss. Maisie turned her face away in disgust. She tried to shake him off but he was too strong and determined. Crying out for help would be futile. The house was too isolated for her voice to reach anyone. Maisie fell back on reason.

"Look, Dave," she gasped, turning back to him, "I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea but this is just not on. Mr. Rymer booked you a room and nothing else. Imagine what he'll say when he hears about this."

"Who cares about Rymer?"

"I do."

"He's just a voice at the end of a mobile telephone."

"Let go of me and I promise to say nothing about this to him."

"Say what you like," he taunted. "Rymer doesn't bother me. I done the job for him and got my money. That's all I worried about. Apart from you, that is. Don't you understand, Maisie? I always have a woman afterwards. This time, it's your turn."

"No!" she exclaimed, finding the strength to push him away.

"But you'll enjoy it," he assured her, slipping off his coat. "Especially if we have Wagner on at the same time. His music stirs the blood. Come on, Maisie," he coaxed, moving slowly towards her. "I'm on fire. Can't you see that?"

Maisie could see it all too well. The last time she had seen that glint in a man's eye, it had belonged to Roy and she had succumbed willingly. Where he had been kind and gentle, however, Dave was violent and frightening. Maisie was not just afraid of sexual assault, she feared for her life. As he tore off his tie and flung it aside, Dave was getting more and more worked up. Maisie looked around for a weapon with which to defend herself. He was on her in a flash, knocking her back against the dressing table and sending an array of pots, jars, combs, brushes, and perfume cascading to the floor. One wild hand groped her breast, the other closed on her hair. He took a second guzzled kiss, then reached for the zip at the back of her dress.

Fury took the place of abject fear. Maisie was outraged that anyone should dare to invade her home and try to invade her body. As they swayed and struggled over the dressing table, they knocked the central panel of mirror glass against the wall, splitting it into several pieces. Dave was unzipping her dress now, peeling it away so that he could sink his teeth into her bare shoulders. Maisie went berserk. Her hand flailed around until she got a grip on one of the jagged remnants. It cut into her palm, but she ignored the pain. As Dave dragged her across to the bed, she used all her

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strength to stab him in the face, producing a howl of rage and a surge of blood.

"You bitch!" he yelled. "I'll kill you for that!"

But Maisie struck again and again, piercing his eye with the long shard of mirror glass and sending it deep into his brain. His body went limp, twitched convulsively, then fell to the floor. Maisie lay on top of him, horrified at the sight beneath her, suddenly aware of the blood gushing from her own hand. It was a full minute before she was able to move. Panting hard, she lurched off to the bathroom and grabbed a towel to wrap around her injured hand, then she made her way gingerly back to the bedroom. Dave was exactly where she had left him, quite motionless. Her mind was racing. Should she call the police? If so, what should she tell them? Every picture told a story, and the one before her did not make pleasant reading. What if the police did not believe her? She had allowed a man to stay in her house and she had stabbed him to death. Those were the salient facts.

Maisie needed time to think. She went to the bathroom again, ran cold water over her face, then struggled downstairs. Pouring herself a glass of whiskey, she drained it in one gulp. It burned her throat, but it helped to clear her mind. Clive Rymer. He was the person to contact. It was he who had inflicted Dave on her. She searched for the number in her address book, wincing at the pain from her wounded hand. When she found the emergency number, she rang it, cradling the telephone between her cheek and shoulder.

A young woman's voice came on the line.

"Yes?"

"I need to speak to Mr. Rymer," said Maisie. "It's very urgent."

"Who is this, please?"

"Just put him on, I beg you."

The voice was calm. "Mr. Rymer is not at this number. I'll need to know who you are before I can put him in touch with you."

"My name is Torrence. Maisie Torrence."

"He'll ring you directly."

The line went dead and Maisie put the receiver down. A minute later, she was snatching it up again as Rymer's voice came on the line. She had never been so grateful to hear it before.

"What seems to be the problem, Mrs. Torrence?" he asked.

"Dave came back to the house this evening."

"That was expressly against my orders."

"He wasn't in a mood to take orders, Mr. Rymer. He came for me. I had to fight him off. I'm afraid there's been a terrible accident."

"Is he badly injured?"

"It's worse than that."

Rymer was brusque. "Who else knows about this?"

"Nobody."

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"You haven't called the police?"

"I rang you first."

"You did the right thing, Mrs. Torrence," he said. "Don't worry. We'll come over to clean up the mess right away. Stay there. Let nobody else in. We'll be in a small van."

"It wasn't my fault, Mr. Rymer," she bleated. "There was nothing else I could do."

"Tell me all about it when I get there. Were you hurt yourself?"

"He knocked me about a bit."

"Bastard!"

"And I cut my hand."

"I'm sorry about this, Maisie. We're on our way."

The van arrived within fifteen minutes, backing up the drive until it was level with the side door of the house. Two men in overalls got out. One of them was carrying a large rubber sheet and some rope. Maisie admitted them and told them where her bedroom was. They padded swiftly upstairs. A third man arrived in a Mercedes. He walked towards the front door. Maisie peered into the darkness.

"Is that you, Mr. Rymer?"

"Yes," he said, reassuringly. "It's all over now."

"If only it were!"

"We'll take care of everything, I promise you."

"How can you?"

"Trust me."

Clive Rymer stepped out of the gloom into the circle of light around the porch. Maisie gaped in astonishment. She had met him before.

"Roy!" she exclaimed.

"Hello, Maisie," he said, lapsing back into his Cockney accent. "Good to see you again. I can't tell you how sorry I am about all this. Dave was completely out of order."

He took her in his arms and hugged her, making sure not to squeeze her injured hand. Maisie was torn between relief and wonderment. She had never expected to see Roy again. In one evening, there had been a death and a resurrection. Perhaps the name Virgin Maisie was not so fanciful, after all. Roy kissed her tenderly.

"How bad is the wound?" he asked.

"It will need stitches."

"I'll run you to the hospital when I've sorted things out here. Let me do all the talking. You're still in shock. Now," he went on, shutting the front door, "where's this maniac? You up there, lads?"

"Front bedroom!" called a voice.

Still comforting Maisie, he went slowly upstairs to her bedroom, leaving her outside while he went in to view the scene. He nodded to his men and they rolled the corpse into the rubber sheet, securing it

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with rope. Maisie was escorted into another bedroom while Dave's body was swiftly removed. The van was soon heard starting up.

Clive Rymer held Maisie by the shoulders and looked at her.

"You're a brave woman," he said, admiringly.

"I was terrified."

"It was self-defense. Pure and simple."

"Will they believe me in court?"

"This won't go anywhere near court. Nor will you. In an hour's time, Dave will have disappeared off the face of the earth. He was due for the chop, anyway. Dodgy customer, as I suspected. I had him lined up for the weekend." He gave her his lazy grin. "You did us a favor, Maisie."

"A favor!" she protested. "Is that what you call it?"

"You took out a hit man tonight. Saves us a lot of trouble."

"How can you be so calm about it?"

She waved her arm involuntarily and winced at the pain. Rymer looked down at the bloodstained towel. He guided her gently towards the bathroom.

"Let's get you cleaned up a little, then I'll take you to hospital."

"Thank you."

"How are you feeling now?"

"Bewildered."

"It will soon pass."

"But who are you—Roy or Clive Rymer?"

"Both. I'll explain why later." They went into the bathroom. "Forgive me?"

"For what?"

"Getting you into that situation."

"It was a nightmare."

"I know, Maisie, and I'm sure it'll take a long time to get over it. We'll replace everything in the bedroom, I give you my word. It'll be exactly as it was before."

"It can never be that."

"Maybe not," he conceded, "but at least you won't have blood all over the place. Where will you sleep tonight?"

"In the spare bedroom."

"Enough space in there for me as well?"

Hope flickered. "You'll stay?"

"After all you've been through, I'd say you deserved company. Besides," he added, kissing her softly on the forehead, "you have some consolation."

"Do I?"

"Yes, I won't have to lie to you anymore."

"Why not?"

"You've killed a man, Maisie. That's an achievement. You're one of us now." ●

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LILAC TIME

by Lesley Grant-Adamson

She had reached her front door and was in the shadow of the lilac tree when the gunman fired. One shot to the head, killing her.

They couldn't trace him or prove who'd hired him. They put it down as an unsolved crime.

That was years ago, but you don't forget, not if you're the victim's brother.

"Laura, you could ask around, couldn't you?" said Ken Davis, a puffy businessman with eyes that showed he was used to being disappointed. "Things might be different, people could be prepared to talk now."

"Sure," I said. "Time alters things. People's loyalties shift."

"You might just find enough to kickstart the police into taking a fresh look at Jenny's murder."

"I might. If I'm lucky."

So it began, with that conversation in my office, the banal first meeting of private detective and client. As soon as he'd left I was telling myself I ought to have said no because even if I struck lucky it could take a lot of hard slogging to find that luck.

You're a fool, I thought. *You succumbed to a look in his eyes, but soon you'll be letting him down, too. What good will that do either of you?*

I began with the files. There were photographs of her: brown-eyed, dark-haired, nothing special. Jenny Davis, killed on her doorstep ten years ago. Kind Jenny, who minded her neighbours' cats when they went away. Efficient Jenny, who ran a steady little business as a florist in north London and ran a tidy private life

"Grant-Adamson is certainly among the top crime writers of our younger generation," said *The Times* (London). She is the author of more than a dozen novels and stories, their content ranging from traditional detection to suspense to private eye cases. Ms. Grant-Adamson's P.I. Laura Flynn originated in the 1991 novel *Flynn*. She and the author debut for *EQMM* in a case that shows that the author "can take the simplest plots and produce a dramatic climax" *(Sunday Telegraph)*.

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besides. She didn't mix with crooks, she wasn't rich or beautiful, and, until she died, she wasn't famous, either. Nothing singled her out from the ordinary except the brutal manner of her dying. Even that was a well-organised and clean affair—unless you count the rush of blood that saturated her suede jacket and stained the Victorian tiling in the porch where she fell.

Jenny was two days short of her twenty-ninth birthday when the shot was fired. She'd booked a table in a local restaurant and invited five friends, two couples and the boyfriend she'd split up with three months earlier. He'd been hoping, he said in the aftermath, that they would get back together. Jenny inviting him to her birthday party had seemed a favourable omen. But when the evening came he spent it in a police station answering difficult questions.

I was going to ask him a few of my own. I thought I might as well start with him because he was easy to trace. Like Jenny, Peter Smart owned a shop. His was a men's clothing shop with his name in bold blue above the High Street window. He was in the office upstairs.

Ten years had thinned his hair but he was sleek for forty, or maybe it was the pick of the rails in the shop below that made him seem so. He'd been married a long time, to an Eileen, and he was father of three boys. When we talked he sounded stilted, but it was a subject he detested and he'd said it all before.

I started by asking what he'd come to believe lay behind the murder. Was the killer a stalker fixated by Jenny, or someone who'd become her enemy? Was her death a case of mistaken identity, or was she a gangland victim because she defied an extortion demand? These were the questions that had hung around since the trigger was pulled.

"God, how I wish we knew the answer, Laura. It's bad enough when someone you love dies suddenly, but it's worse when it's violent. The best you can say is that it was so quick she wouldn't have known."

I grimaced. "The newspaper reports said she screamed. That means she knew." I didn't want him settling into comfy mode, assuming this was an ineffectual trip down memory lane.

His forehead puckered. "You're right. I'd forgotten that bit. Perhaps I wanted to. It makes it slightly easier to bear if you believe she didn't know. But, yes, the scream. If it *was* her screaming. They were never certain of that, were they?"

"Not a hundred percent. Whoever killed her made sure no one was watching."

We were silent for a moment, both thinking about the man and the gun and the shadow of the lilac tree.

"Tell me," I said, "why you and Jenny broke up."

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The newspapers had suggested another man pursuing her, thwarted when her affections returned to Peter Smart. He insisted they'd got that wrong, or, crucially, the timing of it.

"He wouldn't have known there was a strong chance of us getting back together. Jenny and I had spoken on the telephone, that was all. We were to meet for the first time on her birthday."

Seeing my puzzled face, he explained. "I couldn't see her sooner, I was away on business. I telephoned her at work before I went and again while I was away."

"Are you saying you were away when she was killed?" The files hadn't suggested that.

"No," he said. "I flew back from the States the day before she was shot. I had a bad case of jet lag plus a touch of flu so I took to my bed, and I was still there when the police came round with the news. Not breaking it to me gently, don't imagine that. I was number-one suspect. One of her friends, Deidre, had thoughtfully suggested that I was so mad at Jenny for leaving me that I'd decided if I couldn't have her no one should."

A lift of the eyebrows emphasised that the stupidity of the idea bemused him even at this distance in time. I'd read a different version in the files: that the ex-boyfriend had been checked out as a matter of routine but had proved suspiciously nervous. Even now, people had given me knowing looks when his name was mentioned, unwilling to give up the nearest thing anyone ever had to a suspect.

The inquiry had centred on him for days. I was thinking the police must have had their reasons, but it was exceedingly unlikely Peter Smart would be inveigled into sharing them with me.

"What became of Deidre?" If she'd said it, it would be useful to know why. You don't usually drop people into the midst of a murder inquiry without reason.

"No idea." He looked as though he hoped it was something unpleasant.

His telephone rang and his mood change indicated my time was up. He'd consigned Jenny Davis to the past. I didn't dislike him for that, I realised—I just disliked him anyway.

When I left him I was planning to drive to the street where Jenny Davis had died. I almost did, but when I was halfway there I decided to stop and buy flowers. A modest shop with colour cascading down the plant stands outside had caught my eye. Jenny's shop was still a florist's. Now it was called "Rita's."

"Did you know Jenny Davis?" I asked the limp woman who was fussing over a bucket of red and yellow tulips.

She straightened, which was more than the tulips were likely ever to do. A pained look crossed her narrow face.

"Yes, I worked for her." Then she appeared to gather her strength. "Look, I don't want to talk about her. You can't go on

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looking back. I had to come in here day after day and carry on working, pushing it out of my mind. You can't imagine what that was like. And I was only eighteen, a kid."

I mumbled incoherent sympathy but followed her into the shop. It seemed a poor sort of place until I remembered most of the stock was standing outside. A couple of wreaths, in the red and white of Arsenal football colours, rested against the back wall while three pink-and-silver table decorations flounced along a counter.

Rita sidled behind the counter and titivated silvery leaves, wishing I'd leave. She was comically weedy for a florist, a contrast to Jenny, whose photographs showed a bonny, blooming young woman with a sunny smile. Rita's mouth had settled into a sulky line. She glanced up from beneath a shaggy fringe, blond with dark roots.

I began to explain why I was there. "I'm Laura Flynn—"

She cut me off with surprising vigour. "I know who you are; I've seen you around. Besides, her brother said you might come."

This surprised me, although there was no special reason why it should. "Ken Davis?"

"Jenny had only one brother."

"You've kept in touch with the family, have you?" People were always telling me what a long time ten years was. Long enough, I was thinking, for the bonds of tragedy to have snapped and let the sufferers float away from each other. But Ken, unlike Peter Smart, hadn't been able to leave Jenny behind.

"It's a shop. I sell him flowers," Rita said simply. "When she died, he asked me to keep it open. First it was the tributes, you see. People came to her shop to buy the flowers they put on the pavement outside her flat. Later I took a lot of orders for the funeral. Beautiful wreaths, she had."

To me it seemed odd, but doubtless I was encountering the professional attitude.

Rita picked up my thought. "In this trade, a funeral's good business, whoever's it is. If I'd died I'd have been happy for Jenny to do the business. So I did the same for her."

"But it was her shop, right? No business partners?"

She was wiping water off the shop counter now. Her fingers were stubby, hard-working, roughened. "No, it belonged to her, or at any rate to Jenny and the bank manager."

I found a more or less polite way of asking how Rita had managed to get hold of it. Ken, it appeared, had urged her to keep it open and, once Jenny's affairs were settled, he'd encouraged her to buy it.

She gave a self-mocking laugh. "Me and *my* bank manager, I mean, of course."

It wouldn't have cost much, buying a lease on a tiny piece of Victorian terrace in an unsmart location. After a little nudging, she divulged that the shop hadn't made much money during the five

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years Jenny ran it and things hadn't greatly improved. She wouldn't accept sympathy, though.

"Very few people grow rich doing this; you become a florist because you love working with flowers. I came here straight from school. Nothing else I ever wanted to do, ever since I was little. Jenny was the same."

But Jenny hadn't been the same. The files had taught me that. She'd worked for a theatre booking agency and as a telephone salesgirl before training as a florist.

"I was amazed when she was killed," Rita said, satisfied the counter was dry and flinging aside the cloth. "I mean, who kills a *florist?* She didn't have an enemy in the world, everyone said so."

Indeed they had, the way they always say that, and absurdly given the circumstances. All the platitudes were there in the files, I didn't need to hear them again from Rita. But wait. I was foolish to be impatient. Rita was loosening up, ready to reminisce after all. During the next few minutes she told me how she'd "had reservations" about the influence Peter Smart had exerted on Jenny.

"He dominated her, really. Wanted her to give up this shop and pool their money so they could open a dress shop together."

"What about his men's clothing shop?"

"Oh, he didn't open that until later. While he was with Jenny, he was a buyer for one of the big chain stores. No, Peter wanted a shop of his own, but it was Jenny who actually had one. He wanted her to switch, you see, from floristry to the rag trade. I could always tell when he was on at her. Jenny didn't like pressure, but she wasn't good at fighting back."

Rita said she'd been delighted when Jenny ended it, and there'd been no chance of them making up. When I asked about his subsequent telephone calls to the shop, she was definite.

"He rang once, soon after they split up, and she chopped the call off very short indeed. Said she was busy and we had two customers in here. There wasn't anybody except me and we were twiddling our thumbs. Jenny had made up her mind, see, and she wasn't going to let him barge back into her life."

"Did she actually say that to you?"

A shrug. "Something like it, maybe not the exact words. It was a long time ago."

A van pulled up outside and a man approached to collect the table centres. "Balls Pond Banqueting Rooms, love."

The shop was so tiny that when he came in I had to press up against the back wall and the wreaths. Rita helped him tenderly settle the flowers in the van. I was brushing pollen off my black trousers when she came back.

"Can you remember," I said, eager to pick up our conversation,

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"whether you talked to the police about Jenny's attitude toward Peter?"

A shake of the head. "They came here a few times and we talked, although I was run off my feet, what with the tributes as well as the normal work. Anyway, they didn't need to bother me when they could talk to Peter himself, did they?"

Which was one way of looking at it.

I bought myself a bunch of the bowing tulips, because they looked sad and I thought maybe nobody else would, and I bought a flourish of irises and daffodils to take round to my grandmother, who was due a treat. Then I left.

The day was sliding away. I didn't make it to Jenny Davis's house until the next morning.

Ten years is a significant period in the life of a street. This one had climbed the social scale since Jenny rented a ground-floor flat. When I was at school I used to cycle through occasionally, not realising a girl in my class lived nearby. So I remember when owner occupiers were as rare as hens' teeth. Now pride of possession is signalled with window boxes and polished doorknobs, pristine paint work and scrubbed front paths. The lilac tree had survived.

I'd come at the wrong time of day. The sun was striking across the end of the street and the tree cast no shadow. It was the right time of year, though. The lilac was festooned with blossom, mauve splashes against the red-brick backdrop of the house. When I wound down my car window, its scent flooded me. Rich, heady, the very essence of England in early summer.

Sitting there, I watched the houses come to life: men and women scurrying towards bus stops or flinging themselves into cars, children dawdling to school. The milkman was too young for me and so was the postman. They couldn't have been doing these rounds on the day Jenny died.

Better luck with the family across the street, though. The younger ones went off to work but the long-retired couple stayed at home and it was these two, the Myersons, with their down-at-heel dignity and their polished furniture, who told me about Jenny. They described her as a nice girl without an enemy in the world and pointed out where, at the kerbside, she used to park her beige estate car. "Needing an estate," as they put it, "because it was roomy enough for the flowers she was always carting around."

"Funny she was there that early in the afternoon. That's how Alf came to notice her, on the way home from his Thursday lunch at the club," said Mrs. Myerson, while her husband was telling me something else.

They did that the whole time, snipping across each other, offering me a patchwork of information. Most of it was familiar from my trawl through the files, but then he started to say " . . . it

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wasn't her name but it was her address on the envelope. And I said to her . . ."

". . . I always maintained that old lilac ought to have been chopped down, ugly old thing it is most of the year, and throwing shade across her neighbour's window."

". . . cross out the name and drop it back in the postbox, let the postmen sort it out . . ."

". . . Gladys who lived next door used to moan to me about it, taking all her light. And Gladys liked the sun, being Jamaican . . ."

". . . but you don't like to open other people's letters, do you?"

I managed to bring them to a halt. By dint of accepting an offer of tea, I got Mr. Myerson and Jenny's mysterious letters to myself. Mrs. Myerson interrupted twice, once while the kettle was boiling and again while the tea brewed, but in between I elicited his story.

Jenny Davis had twice sought the whereabouts of a Stephanie Collins, whose mail was turning up on her doormat. The envelopes were addressed to 5 Albertine Terrace, clearly printed on a word processor, but Terrace had been struck through with blue Royal Mail pencil and replaced with Road and a post code. Mr. Myerson had proposed trying number 9 "because, over the telephone, a five could have been mistaken for a nine." It hadn't. He suggested she check the street directory "in case there was an Albertine Road or Terrace in another part of the city." There wasn't. He suggested looking in the telephone directory. Collinses were legion, but not in that road. He told her to "open the envelope and see who'd sent it." She didn't like to tamper with somebody else's mail.

"When did all this happen?" I heard teacups; I was desperate for answers before we had company.

He appeared shamefaced. "About a month before she was killed."

"I see." What I saw was that he was enjoying my attention but felt in his heart that the wrongly directed letters were irrelevant.

He believed it on good authority. "The police said they didn't have anything to do with what happened to her."

A tea tray was used to shove back the door of the sitting room. Our time was up.

Awash with the Myersons' powerful gingery tea, I sat in my office and made routine checks that failed to trace Stephanie Collins. *A pity,* I was thinking, *that Jenny Davis was such a nicely brought up girl that she hadn't liked to peep inside the envelopes.*

Who says she didn't? my other half argued back. *She wouldn't have told the Myersons everything. And if she got them together, it's unlikely she succeeded in telling them much at all.*

I could imagine busy Jenny Davis, with her shop to run and her deliveries to make in her beige estate car, extricating herself from the friendly Myersons as fast as she could. Who might she have

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told instead? There was one person she was obliged to spend plenty of time with, and maybe the minor mystery of the letters had provided a welcome change from the usual chat. I returned to Rita and her brave little shop, an oasis of fragrance amidst the traffic fumes.

"*Ages* before," said Rita, demolishing Mr. Myerson's time scale. "Could have been six months, maybe longer. And nothing came of it, anyway. Jenny showed me one of the letters. The second one. She'd put the first one back in the post, but when the second one came, curiosity got the better of her."

My stomach muscles were tightening in an anticipatory way. "What did it say?"

Rita frowned. "It wasn't very nice, Laura. Jenny was in here when she opened it and she went very quiet. I was doing a wreath at the time, struggling a bit because they'd ordered a rocket and a star burst. They come up with ideas you wouldn't believe, and then someone like me has got to work out how to do it."

I gave an encouraging grunt.

Rita swung back on track. "Well, anyway, I looked up and she was sitting here, where I am now, and she was very still, just staring at the sheet of paper. I spoke to her, but she didn't answer, so I came and read it over her shoulder."

"Do you remember the words?"

Cautious, because I'd challenged her once before about exact wording, Rita frowned at me from beneath her untidy fringe. "I can tell you it didn't start off 'Dear Stephanie,' as though it was going to be a letter, and there was no address or signature. Basically what it said was that this Stephanie should have done what she was told and she'd made a big mistake if she thought she was going to get away with it."

"Oh dear." Understatement.

There was a pause while Rita struggled for accuracy and I fought down the urge to throw questions at her, afraid of spoiling her concentration. Unfortunately, a subdued man arrived to gather up the red and white wreaths. Once he'd paid and gone, I sensed that a moment had been lost.

Rita wiped water off the counter. She needed to make an entry in a book and file away a cheque in her till. I was unclear how much of this was essential and how much a ploy to keep me waiting.

"Rita, what did Jenny do with the letter?"

"Tore it in half and chucked it away. Obviously, Stephanie Collins wouldn't have wanted it, would she?"

I murmured what might pass for agreement, then asked whether there'd been further letters. She said not. Telephone calls? No, again.

"Laura, it's no use. The police couldn't find out who killed her, so how can you expect to?"

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Because loyalties shift, that's why; but I didn't say so to Rita as there was no evidence they had. I decided to leave her to get on with her day. Her telephone had begun to ring and a pailful of exotic lilies were making me sneeze.

She was on the phone, writing in her book again, and I was on the point of miming goodbye when I had a whim to see the shop's old books. Did she have them?

"At home," she said with reluctance. "If you really want to."

That evening she opened up a bedroom cupboard and revealed a shelf of order books. I picked out two, covering the year Jenny Davis died and the year before. To Rita's relief, I was eager to carry them away rather than take up residence in her spare room.

They were a curious form of reading, but soon I was adept at dodging the functions at, say, the Balls Pond Banqueting Rooms and homing in on the small orders. It's all bespoke down at the florist's, you know. Your every word is their command, which is why young Rita had been known to struggle with a rocket and a star burst and it's why everything gets written down meticulously.

Jenny Davis's handwriting was rounded and confident, Rita's a spiky scrawl in the early days, although it had matured. It was Rita who'd taken down an order for a wreath for Stephanie, to be delivered to Albertine Terrace. Jenny couldn't have done it, it was ordered days after she died.

The cheque, from a Mr. Perry, had bounced. I was curious to know where the wreath had been delivered, although convinced Rita wouldn't remember. I pictured her in the shop in the days after Jenny's death, shocked by the murder, barely coping, and failing to notice that a Stephanie Collins who'd been threatened months earlier might be the same as a Stephanie of Albertine Terrace who was now dead and in need of a wreath.

I wondered whether Peter Smart knew about the Stephanie letters. "No," he said. A truncated telephone call, his children were squealing in the background. He was a busy man with a life to lead.

Both Rita and Peter Smart had initially been reluctant to talk to me about Jenny, but more telling was the discrepancy about the telephone calls. He claimed to have rung Jenny at the shop, Rita was adamant he hadn't.

I swivelled my chair and looked out of the window, watching traffic passing down below, the brilliance of trees in summer foliage, and the resolute face of my personal Big Ben. When the church clock struck the hour, I made up my mind what to do.

Ken Davis was in despair as I walked up the drive to his house. He'd retired early from running a computer company and he was finding working a lawn mower harder.

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"They *say* you just sit on it and ride up and down," he said, the lament of the ride-on lawn mower owner everywhere.

We perched on a garden bench, he with his back to the unbiddable machine and the half-cut lawn, me watching blackbirds seeking snacks in the shorn part. It was a big garden for London, in all a third of an acre, mostly lawn but with neat shrubs and a few trees: gnarled old fruit trees and a wispy young lilac. Odd how I was noticing lilacs wherever I went.

He said, "Of course this place is too big for me, you don't need to be a detective to spot that."

"But it's been your home a long time."

"I bought it in the seventies, as soon as I started making money. Eva used to look after the house and garden while I ran the business. But I'm afraid I rather let things go after she moved out."

"You divorced?" Mrs. Davis was a shadowy figure in the files, a wife photographed holding his arm as they left an inquest, a woman who fielded reporters' questions when he was too distressed to come to his front door.

"Three years after Jenny died. I put it like that, Laura, because it was Jenny's death that caused the breakup. You could say Eva recovered from the tragedy but I didn't. Suddenly there was a chasm between us, unbridgeable. She said I was obsessed, that I did nothing but work and fret about Jenny, and that it wasn't as though what happened was my fault in any way. She stuck it for a while, then she went."

I voiced indistinct sympathy, grateful for the explanation but hoping he didn't expect to hear in return how I became the ex Mrs. Brenan. Quickly, I moved on to ask about the Stephanie letters. He was positive Jenny hadn't mentioned them.

"Ken, how close were you and Jenny? What I mean is, how likely is it that she would have told you about them?"

"She was my little sister, eight years younger than me. We lost our parents when she was in her teens. Yes, we were close. Maybe I was overprotective, although I don't remember her complaining."

"Did you see her frequently?"

"A couple of times a month, and we talked on the telephone every week. But, Laura, what's so interesting about wrongly addressed letters?"

So then I had to tell him what was in the letter Rita read.

He pursed his lips. "Rita can be imaginative. Sorry, I ought to have warned you."

Yes, I thought, *he ought, especially as he went to the trouble of warning Rita I'd call on her.*

I pressed him to explain "imaginative." My abiding impression of Rita was the way I'd first seen her, limp as her floppy tulips.

Ken said, "Rita's good-hearted and she was marvellous when

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Jenny died. Kept the business ticking over, worked solidly, held things together."

"But?"

"Well, for example, she convinced herself Jenny's business was going to fall into her lap. It was embarrassing, she was going around saying I'd agreed to her taking it over."

"But she did."

"Eventually, and as a proper sale. She didn't magically become a stand-in for Jenny without having to put her hand in her pocket, which is apparently what she was daydreaming."

Then he told me she'd caused friction between Jenny and Peter Smart by relaying a story which she ought to have realised was untrue. "She put him in a bad light. Jenny was annoyed. I remember her saying she'd have to be more guarded where Rita was concerned."

"Sounds as though I ought to be more guarded, too."

Assuming Ken Davis is telling me the truth, assuming any of them are.

For a few days I chased around speaking to Jenny's friends and the witnesses who'd been helpful to the police ten years earlier, all except Deidre, whose theory about a lover's revenge had focussed police attention on Peter Smart. She eluded me. Flouting my theory, allegiances had not altered.

I ran through what I'd learned that was fresh and not culled from the files. The Myersons had introduced the misdirected mail. Rita hadn't mentioned it until I did, but she'd then recited the fierce content of the second letter. Ken's cautioning remarks about her now set me wondering whether to believe in the threat to Stephanie Collins or, indeed, in Peter Smart's effort to make Jenny give up her shop and help finance the one he wanted. Rita had been open in her admiration of Jenny and Ken Davis and her antipathy to Peter.

Peter Smart's position remained that he and Jenny had been about to get back together. My feeling was that if he'd exaggerated, it was excusable. Jet-lagged, waking up as the prime suspect in a murder case, it was only logical to insist they had been on the fondest terms.

Yet I worried at it. *Why did he fail to convince the police? They described him as behaving like a guilty man. Guilty of what? The shooting? Hiring the killer? Or something else entirely?*

Ten years on, I wasn't interviewing exactly the same people the police had confronted. My subjects had matured, changed their perceptions, tidied up their stories. *I* wasn't going to find anyone behaving in a guilty manner. Ten years on, there are no smoking barrels.

One advantage of being late on the scene is that some of the guesswork goes out of it. I was able to see that the only person

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who'd gained from Jenny's death was Rita. But even if she'd been under the peculiar misapprehension that her boss's death would result in the business falling into her hands, it was hardly a motive for murder. Floristry was demanding, no easy way to make a living, and Rita had been aware that Jenny's business wasn't hugely profitable.

Outlandish to picture Rita bad-mouthing Peter Smart to cut him out of Jenny's life, and then arranging murder to procure the shop for herself. I did picture it, though. I pictured every possible permutation of guilt.

I was heartless enough to challenge the grief that gnawed at Ken Davis. Was there a chance it was founded on guilt because he'd resisted paying protection money to a gang and had seen his sister killed in reprisal? As a theory, it made more sense for a successful businessman to be targeted than a struggling florist. But, of course, it was crazy because Ken would have revealed the truth while the barrel was still smoking.

The only fresh detail I had was Stephanie Collins. Until a better idea came along, I meant to pursue her.

And at that point Deidre walked into my office. She was tall and slim, glowing with the kind of Caribbean beauty that wins contests. She was intelligent, too, a television journalist and nobody's fool. Why then, ten years back, had she accused Peter Smart? She told me a depressing story.

"I was at Jenny's flat one evening when he tried to force his way in. The upstairs tenant let him slip into the house as she was going out, but Jenny wouldn't have him in her flat. They had a row in the hall. He was threatening her. I'd never liked him, he seemed a bully and that evening he proved it."

I poured Deidre a cup of my best filter coffee. She'd made the effort, having heard I was seeking her, and so would I. "Did he mistreat her?"

"If so she didn't mention it to her friends. I can't say he hit her that evening, either, although there was quite a scuffle before we got the door closed."

"You were helping her?"

"Without my weight against the door she couldn't have done it. Once it was locked, we heard him ranting in the hall, saying she'd be sorry, stupid threats that we laughed off. But when I heard she was dead, I knew I ought to tell the police."

Deidre explained that once she learned it was a shooting, she found it impossible to picture Peter Smart as the murderer.

I clarified, suggesting, "He seemed an ordinary sort, not a man with a criminal bent?"

Her eyes lit with mischief and she gave me a wonderful smile. "Wrong, Laura. Well, that depends how you feel about cannabis."

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"Was he dealing?"

"Smuggling. Smaller than small-time. Minute. You see, his job took him around. He'd be sent to the Far East, the Indian subcontinent, Eastern Europe, South America, sometimes North Africa. He was setting up deals with textile weavers and clothing manufacturers. But he couldn't resist bringing back a little marijuana."

"Did he ever get busted?"

"Only by Jenny. She hated it. Oh, that makes her sound a spoilsport, but it wasn't like that, what she hated was the way it changed his personality."

I had another question but it was an awkward one. I delayed.

Deidre anticipated. "No, Laura, I didn't bother the police with that. He was an amateur, not part of a drugs ring, and what happened to Jenny had nothing to do with Peter's souvenirs."

"I see." I was imagining the stuff lying around after his latest foreign trip when the police arrived to accuse him of murder. Suspicious behaviour? Acted like a guilty man? I could believe it.

I returned to Albertine Road in midafternoon when the lilac tree was throwing deep shadow over the porch where Jenny Davis had been shot. There was a parking space right where she used to leave her beige estate. I wound down my car window and breathed lilac. This close, I could see the bees fussing over it. I was waiting. Mrs. Myerson had mentioned that her husband went to lunch at a local club on Thursday afternoons and returned home at three-thirty. He'd done it on the day of the shooting, and just as he'd let himself into the house he'd spotted Jenny's car being parked. By the time he'd taken off his jacket and walked through to the kitchen, the gunman had struck.

Ah, here he comes.

I walked along the pavement to meet Alf Myerson, keen to talk before he reached home and perpetual interruption. He wasn't amazed to see me because he'd recognised my stripy car.

"I need," I said, "to quiz you about those letters and Stephanie Collins."

We sat on the warm stone coping of his front wall, a gloriously sunny spot, and gazed across at the lilac tree, ignoring the occasional pedestrians and cars that whizzed across our view.

We checked every detail he could remember. All was as he'd previously explained until he added apologetically, "There's one thing I've never told anybody because of the wife."

"Go on."

"Laura, that first letter. Well, Jenny didn't put it in the post like I said; I did it for her. I was going out that morning and I offered to save her trying to park near the postbox, which is right by a junction and really inconvenient when traffic's heavy."

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A letdown. It couldn't have made a scrap of difference who posted it. But I was too quick.

He said, "I stuck it in the pocket of my mac, which was hanging in the hall, but by the time I went out the weather had cleared up so I didn't wear the mac. It was about ten days before I put my hand in that pocket again."

I made a gesture, as if to say too bad but we all forget things.

Mr. Myerson said, "I didn't give that letter a thought until Jenny brought the second one, and then I didn't dare let on, not with my wife there. I wouldn't have heard the end of it, offering to do a favour for a neighbour and then not bothering."

He trailed off. I was thinking, and I believe we were both thinking, that if the first letter was also a warning and had anything to do with Jenny Davis's destiny, his forgetfulness could have given fate a helping hand.

"Except," I said aloud, "I'm told that Jenny opened the second letter and it was anonymous. The post office, or Royal Mail or whoever delivered letters ten years ago, couldn't have returned it."

"Oh?"

"What's more, the sender wouldn't have written anonymously the second time if he'd previously identified himself."

A burden appeared to lift from him. His shoulders seemed less stooped, his eyes brighter. "What I did made no difference?"

"None," I said, and made an old man content.

I wished I could satisfy my client as simply. Unfortunately, tracing Stephanie Collins was slow and tedious. Bright ideas faded out. Promising leads led nowhere. I even resorted to wining and dining Detective Sergeant Ray Donnelly, whose help is often invaluable to me but to be eschewed whenever possible because he's a mean character who seeks favours but rarely returns them.

Ray toyed with his sushi. The new Japanese place was his surprisingly adventurous suggestion.

Once we'd ordered I couldn't resist remarking, "I didn't realise you liked Japanese."

He grinned. "I don't, but neither do my colleagues, which is more important."

So we weren't merely having dinner together, we were hiding. As the porcelain bowls paraded in front of us, I plagued him with questions about the Jenny Davis murder, not that he knew as much as I did about it. Then we forgot about the case and gossiped about people who were alive and well and causing us varying kinds of disquiet.

Ray rang me a week later with a few unpublished details from the police investigation, but by my calculation they didn't cover the cost of sushi for two. I felt mildly cheated.

In this frame of mind I dropped in to see one of my school

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friends who works at a new hairdresser's near my office. In my life, hairdressers are a basic necessity once in a while. Veema's clients, on the other hand, plug in their laptops and clatter away at legal reports and film treatments while having their roots done. Juniors don't hang around leaning on brooms and hubble-bubbling about whichever client has just left. Oh no, they're far too busy fetching breakfasts and lunches from the fashionable Euphorium restaurant over the road. Veema's place has style in aggressive quantities.

She sped through the minimalist acres and met me a few paces inside the salon. Didn't want me and my untamable locks making the place look untidy, I suppose. We fixed a time to talk. As I backed out, a famous actress looked up from thumbing a film script and scorched me with a look she ought to reserve for deodorant ads.

I went home, ate a sandwich not from Euphorium, fiddled with the washing machine, made a few calls, and sulked. *I'm never going to find out who killed Jenny Davis.*

Actually, you aren't trying to. You're looking for Stephanie Collins instead.

Well, yes, but—

No, it can't be the same thing.

Hold on. If Alf Myerson is correct about the letters arriving at Jenny's house within a month of her death, that increases the possibility of a link.

Believing him does mean discounting Rita's opinion that it was at least six months before.

I totted up a variety of reasons to prefer Mr. Myerson as a witness. He was precise, he was a creature of habit, and nobody could call him imaginative. Also, he'd spent ten years fretting that the letters might have been relevant to the murder.

What I required from Veema was the telephone number of her cousin who grew up in Albertine Road. I remembered that because the girl's parents had owned a corner shop and one day I'd gone in there by chance and been astonished to find Veema behind the counter earning her pocket money.

"It's the Jenny Davis case," I said when Veema escaped the salon and arrived at my flat. She hadn't visited before and she looked around approvingly at my lack of clutter. I didn't spoil it by explaining this wasn't a style statement, it was poverty. Instead I told her I was seeking any information, however trivial, about Jenny, but also about a woman called Stephanie Collins who'd possibly lived in Albertine Terrace.

She corrected me. "Road. There isn't a street called Albertine Terrace. Albertine Road is the only Albertine in London. They

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were usually Alberts or Albertas after Victoria's Prince Albert, you know, but the Albertines were roses."

"Huh?"

"Yes, if you want the terrace you need to check the Roses."

I said, "Huh," again. She was loving it.

"There are three or maybe four streets made up of short rows of terrace houses and each row is called after a type of rose. You find the Roses by turning off Eastland Road, on the left."

I gaped. "How on earth do you know all this?"

She laughed. "My uncle owned the corner shop, remember? I used to do a paper round for him."

Armed with Veema's local knowledge, I drove to the Roses. Sure enough, the middle one of each row of nine houses bore a terracotta plaque. Builders often chose royal names or family names for this purpose, but whoever built the Roses estate had favoured, well, roses. Originally, I suppose, these names were part of the addresses, but nowadays the street numbers run straight through, making them redundant. I walked down Rambler Road, past terraces called Gallica and Moss, and then, tucked around a corner beyond Sweet Briar Terrace, I came upon Albertine.

The row of houses in the cul-de-sac had charm, not entirely spoiled by having to face a brick wall protecting a railway line. I pretended to look down at a passing train while I decided whether to call at number 5 or try an indirect approach. A flicker of movement at a downstairs bay persuaded me. I went over and recited a story about having known someone who'd lived next door.

The woman I was speaking to was skimpily thin, young and streetwise with spiky hair. A flabby toddler staggered out of the living room and clung to her skirt. She stroked his head absently.

"I share this place with my sister," she said. "She's been here forever; it's Jess you want to talk to but she's out now."

I supposed that if Jess had lived there forever it was likely this one, Lindi, had come visiting. So I tried a name on her.

"Did she ever mention Stephanie to you?"

"*Stephie!* Is that who you're looking for?" A hand covered her mouth. "Oh my gawd."

"Lindi, what is it?"

But I knew. Anyone would have known. There wasn't excitement on her face, there was horror.

The child whimpered, catching her reaction. She bent down and snatched him up, holding him between us, perhaps as a shield.

"Oh my gawd," she repeated, but this time with resignation rather than shock.

"Why don't you tell me." I made the suggestion gently, in a tone to soothe the boy as well as reassure her I was unlikely to break down myself.

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She backed into the living room, apparently expecting me to follow her, which I did. She gestured with her head and I obeyed and sat on a rumpled sofa, amidst plastic bricks and assorted soft toys. The room smelled of nappies and air freshener, but mostly of nappies.

Frantically seeking a way out, although surely knowing there wasn't one, she began gabbling, "This Stephanie you're talking about, maybe it isn't the one who was . . . "

I encouraged her with a look.

She said flatly, "Stephie Glamis is dead."

"Glamis?" As I echoed the name I felt a surge of disappointment.

She was saying, "I hope you weren't close. You know, I always prayed I'd never have to break that sort of news to anybody."

"Are you absolutely certain that was her name?"

"Definitely." And then she added, "She always used her own name, for professional reasons, she said, but I can't remember what her job was."

My theory wasn't quite dead yet. What, I asked her, was Stephie's married name? She said Collins.

I told her that was the name by which I knew Stephie and I asked when and how she'd died.

Lindi considered before saying, "It must be getting on for ten years."

She delayed telling me the rest. Instead, she hoisted the baby onto her hip and went out of the room. I sat there thinking this was the most tantalising moment anyone could have chosen to change a nappy.

However, when she came back she was holding a plastic photograph album and saying, "This was taken on Jess's twenty-fifth. She had a party in the garden and Stephie came."

Jess was the one blowing candles. Stephie was the one who looked rather like Jenny Davis. Brown eyes, dark hair, same build, and identical hairstyle. This one had a gap-toothed cheeky smile. They'd lived a few minutes away from each other and with similar addresses.

"Lindi, how did she die?"

I was ready for the story of the shot to the head, the vanishing gunman, and the sheer lack of clues.

Lindi shuddered. "She went under a tube train. At Marble Arch. They couldn't decide whether she was pushed off the platform or she fell, so it was an open verdict in the end. To begin with, the police thought she might have jumped because she was depressed about her husband."

"Had he left her?"

I received a half-smile in reply. "Not the way you mean. He was in prison. Shook our Jess, I can tell you. She'd no idea the guy next

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door was out with a gang robbing factories, thought he worked night shifts. Well, I suppose he did."

The baby glugged vomit down her T-shirt and she swore softly and set him down on the floor at my feet.

Going for a tissue, she said over her shoulder: "The thing is, you expect criminals to be living it up in posh houses, the way you see it on the telly."

"Not the unsuccessful ones," I said drily.

"But that isn't the end of it. This Robbie Collins who Stephie was married to, he decided to turn supergrass. Jess reckoned Stephie didn't realise until then how deep he was in. So there's Robbie on remand in Brixton and trying to get a really short sentence by giving evidence against the others, and there's Stephie going about in a daze."

"Did the gang threaten her?"

"Jess realised something was going on when Stephie received a wreath with her own name on it. About six weeks before she died, that was. It wasn't mentioned at the inquest, though."

By this time the baby's nappy was going critical and the telephone had started ringing. It seemed a good time to leave.

Before turning into the main stretch of Rambler Road, I looked back down the cul-de-sac. The house where Stephanie had lived was freshly painted and a miniature lilac was growing in an expensive terra-cotta pot by the porch.

By the end of the week I'd tracked down one of the men Robbie Collins had helped to convict. He was older than I'd expected, in his forties, and with a bouncy energy that surprised me, although I suppose burglars need to be athletic. Since his release, Wayne's been manning a flower stall by an Underground station. It wasn't difficult to persuade him to talk because he was anxious to be rid of me and was in no position to walk off himself. Customers kept butting in, waving bunches of narcissi and forced carnations in our faces, but I was undeterred. Providing I didn't have a sneezing fit, things were going my way.

When there was a pause he said, with heavy emphasis, "Look, darling, I don't know anything about it. Okay?"

"Wayne, I'm not suggesting you were involved in murder. All I'm saying is surely you heard something. You were with the people Robbie Collins was threatening."

A bunch of daffs shot in front of my face. Coins jingled in my ear. The daffs, now wrapped in paper, bobbed back again.

He said, "And he done it, too, the bastard."

"Yes, and you know what happened to his wife."

"Three pound fifty, love." This time it was a mixed spray, already wrapped in silver paper.

"And the florist who was shot a quarter of a mile from where the

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Collinses lived, that was a mix-up, wasn't it? Someone mistook her for Mrs. Collins, didn't they?"

Silently he accepted the cash for some freesias. "If you know the answers, Laura, why are you asking questions?"

"Because I need to be sure that what I tell Jenny Davis's family is as close as I can get to the truth. Wayne, you were on the inside of this story . . ."

"I never planned murder, not Collins's missis and not any other woman."

"But you know who did, and we both know why." After a pause, during which I watched thoughts passing over his face as clearly as ripples over water, I gently urged him. "Please. Not for me, for Jenny's family. It would make so much difference to them if they knew why she died like that."

The next pause was longer. Then, interrupted by petunias and irises, he began sketching out the plan to threaten Stephanie Collins's life as a means of preventing her husband giving evidence against his partners in crime. Without names, he told me that a contact in south London had hired the gunman, a Czech, and set up the job. Most people, he said, believed it was the Czech who'd caused the muddle about street names and targeted the wrong woman, but others blamed the mistake on the man who issued his orders.

"After he done it, the Czech and his gun left the country so that the job couldn't be linked to anyone here. But killing that florist by mistake caused such a fuss it was decided not to risk another shooting. That's why they shoved Robbie's wife under the train. Worked like a dream, nobody could prove it was murder."

His admiration of the scheme was chilling. I blurted, "Two innocent women were murdered!"

He stared at me as though I was the one whose manner was shocking.

"Look, if you don't want to hear, you shouldn't ask."

I tried to extricate myself but it was hopeless. Our conversation was over. His attention wasn't on me as I said goodbye. I turned away. I'd been intending to buy an armful of flowers as a practical way of saying thanks for his time, but I no longer had the heart.

Two days later I sat with Ken Davis in his garden again. Since my last visit he'd bullied the mower to complete the cutting of the lawn. When I remarked how pretty the garden was, dappled with shade from the blossoming trees, he treated this as a request for a tour. I believe he felt sorry for me living in a first-floor flat, which he hadn't seen, and working from an office above a very busy street, which he had.

His great pride was the fig tree against his south-facing wall. Together we counted the bulbous green fruit and argued good-

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naturedly about the total. When we ventured over the lawn to inspect the fruit trees, we passed the lilac, close enough for me to read the plaque at the foot. "For Jenny," it said, followed by the dates that encircled her life.

Ken said, "One reason I couldn't move after Eva left."

And I wondered silently, *One reason Eva left? For her, it might have come to symbolise Ken's obsession.*

I began my story: "I can tell you why your sister was killed, but I can't name the gunman."

Since my visit to Rambler Road I'd confirmed Lindi's story about Robbie and Stephanie Collins. While he was awaiting trial Collins had claimed he'd been threatened that his wife would be harmed if he gave evidence. Stephanie, though, had denied receiving threats.

When I'd finished explaining to Ken Davis how easy it was for anyone unfamiliar with the area to assume Albertine Terrace to be the name of Jenny's street, instead of one of several rows of houses in Rambler Road, his expression hardened.

Bitterly he said: "If only the police had spotted that at the time."

"Oh, but they couldn't have. They didn't see the misdirected letters and the officers who interviewed the Myersons had no knowledge of Robbie Collins and his wife so the name wouldn't have had any significance for them."

He was quick to apologise. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, Laura. You've actually come up with an explanation, haven't you, which is more than I've had for the last ten years."

But I noticed the look in his eye, the one that says he's been disappointed too often. I reminded him, "Ken, you once said you hoped I'd find enough to kickstart the police into taking a fresh look at Jenny's murder. Well, I'm pretty sure that's what I've given you."

They're still looking into it. Robbie Collins received his short sentence but died in a prison fight, so they must do without his help. The men he helped convict are largely silent, although loyalties are changing. Two prisoners recently confirmed Wayne's identification of the killer as a Czech who was building a reputation as a hit man when he was killed during a shootout with the French police.

Myself, I think we've already learned as much as we'll ever know about the Jenny Davis murder, and I'm ready to move on. For her friends and family, though, there's no closing the file. For Peter Smart who might have married her, for Rita who shared her skill with flowers, for her brother who planted lilac in remembrance, and for the Myersons whose windows look out on the scene of the crime, the seasons bring Jenny back. Memories are made fresh every year when the lilacs break into glory and their perfume sweetens the London air. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

JUGGERNAUT

by Nancy Springer

"Good Lord, why am I doing this?" Marietta whispered, teetering on her platform heels, immobilized at the door of the hotel ballroom. On a logical level she knew exactly why she was there: Five murdered men, that was why. Despite her scarlet flirty-skirted dress and the "Temptress Red" Shampoo-It-Away hair dye covering her gray, Marietta Becker was on duty, her badge tucked into her capacious purse. Just doing her job. But on a woman's gut level ... good grief, a singles dance? With a disco ball, of all things, wheeling a slow juggernaut in the middle of the ceiling and hurling spangles of confusion onto the women seated at the circular tables, the men standing in the shadows, a few couples awkwardly clinched on the dance floor? Snowed under by those silver sequins of reflected light, Marietta froze at the edge of enormity: Lord, she'd been married almost as long as she'd been a cop; she didn't venture to places like this. "What am I *doing* here?" she complained aloud.

"Honey," answered a woman about her age crowded next to her in the Art Deco doorway, "I ask myself that selfsame question every blessed week." Marietta hadn't expected the other women, who

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should regard her as competition, to speak with her, but she tried not to show her surprise as she turned. "Really?"

"Sure. But it beats sitting home alone." Prim in a business suit, the woman slapped a nametag onto her blazer above her left breast. First name only, of course: Pat. She asked Marietta, "Your first time?"

"Yes."

"Well, come sit with us. Smile," Pat coached, leading the way into the disco-starred darkness of the dance.

Nancy Springer, a longtime fiction writer with 38 published novels to her name, did not think she wrote mystery until she won back-to-back Edgar awards (for a YA novel in '95 and for a children's novel in '96). She has since attempted the occasional mystery story, while continuing to write adult fantasy novels and YA. "Juggernaut" is her first story for *EQMM*.

Following, Marietta felt men's glances slide over her like soap. With her teeth bared, she peered through the polka-dot gloom. In front of her, the linen-draped tables seemed to float like white lily pads at the edge of a black and shining dance-floor lake. Centered on each table, candles burned—for romance, or for a wake? Somewhere in this room, most likely, smiled a murderer.

Five victims had been found so far, all male. One from Harrisburg, two from York, one from Carlisle, one from Williamsport, for God's sake. All over the map in more ways than one. A young black college professor, a middle-aged Pennsylvania Dutch truck driver, a Greek Cypriot fish-sticks salesman, an unemployed Latino suspected of drug trafficking, and a retired Army master sergeant. They were such a disparate collection of stiffs that only the M.O. marked them as the victims of a serial killer. "The Crusher," the news called him.

"You want to face the dance floor?" Pat asked Marietta, offering a chair at an angle to one of the tables.

"Sure."

Sitting, Marietta slipped into her purse the card they had given her when she had paid to get in: HeartSong Singles, Attend Six Dances Get the Seventh Free. The card that had been found in the wallets of two of the five Crusher victims. Names of two others had been found on the mailing list, but that was strictly departmental info, Marietta's captain had warned. What about the fifth victim? she had asked. Married, he'd told her with a look that told her to butt out, it was not her case, she was just there to carry the purse. Bill was doing the work, and where the heck was he?

"So, Mary," Pat said, glancing at Marietta's nametag, "what's the story, morning glory?"

"Oh, uh, the usual." Marietta had not thought she would need a cover story.

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Pat nodded. "He dumped you for a younger woman?" Marietta had to force herself to nod and smile. She was here as a single, she reminded herself—but no, it couldn't happen, her husband would never dump her. George wasn't very affectionate, but that was just because he worked too hard. Sometimes, like the last couple of days, their work schedules were so off whack they didn't even see each other. She hadn't gotten to tell him about this assignment—but that was probably just as well. She never knew what was likely to make him hit the ceiling. The idea of her dressing up and dancing with other men might do it, even though it was just her job and he'd been happy for her when after twenty years of parking meters and traffic detail she'd been promoted to undercover. He hadn't minded her putting herself into danger playing Muggable Mary.

Huh. Nobody better try to snatch the purse tonight. In it were guns, handcuffs, radio, all the equipment Bill might need if he found out anything. Some sort of kinky homo sex motivation, Homicide thought. They profiled the Crusher as a blue-collar male, hefty enough to muscle his victims into some sort of machine press to torture and kill them, strong enough to dump the bodies afterward. Bill had to be hugging his gun. Where was he? They kept it so dark in here it was hard to tell, especially with that stupid disco ball slinging snowflakes of light in her eyes. Marietta scanned the straggle of men around the dance floor—funny, most of the women, at the tables, were chatting with one another, while most of the men stood staring in parallel, not speaking. And what a selection of men—round men in fuzzy sweaters, edgy men in suits, cadaverous old men in pleated slacks and crepe-soled shoes, men trying to look sporty in Nikes and collared T-shirts, a black guy in dreadlocks, a Don Johnson pretender in a Miami Vice hat, for God's sake, and a ponytailed biker type in leathers; lean men and teddy-bear men and bearded men and boyish men, and—*and I'd like to get to know every one of them,* Marietta realized, surprising herself. *I like men. All kinds.*

And she felt a stab of guilt at the thought, as if she'd been unfaithful. Throughout her years of marriage, she'd trained herself not to look at other men. Being at this singles dance was doing strange things to her.

But getting into character, that was part of the job, wasn't it? Part of going undercover?

A tall gray-haired man headed toward her. She stiffened in anticipation; would he ask her to dance? But he walked past her without a glance, stopped at the next table, and spoke to a tawny young woman in a very abbreviated dress. Together they walked to the dance floor.

A hefty blond woman in a make-me-look-slim-please black tunic sat down on Marietta's other side. "Hi, I'm Deb," she said to Mari-

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etta. "Yo, gang," she called past Marietta toward Pat. "Wearing your shoes out dancing?"

A general chuckle ensued. Marietta glanced over her shoulder. The table had filled with women about her age, some round, some skinny, some comfy and some dressed to kill, all kinds, and Marietta imagined the men looking them over the way she had looked over the men, thinking, wow, I like them all.

She watched a fat man dancing with a perfectly endowed blonde half his age. Marietta wanted to dance. The deejay was playing "Crocodile Rock," damn it, and she never got to dance; George hated dancing, it had been years . . . She demanded, "When *do* they ask us to dance?"

Quite a lot of laughter erupted, and Deb patted her hand. "You're new, right?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Honey, everybody starts the same way," Pat said. "The old guy in the suspenders, by the water cooler," she added, "if he asks you to dance, say no. He puts his hand on your butt."

"You're brave, coming by yourself," Deb said.

Deb seemed nice, Marietta thought at the same moment as she finally spotted Bill talking with the bartender. Stalking a murderer. Was it the distinguished-looking older man with the younger woman, or the bald guy dancing with yet another young girl, this one willowy and vaguely reminiscent of an Afghan hound? Or was it the guy in the Miami Vice hat, or the leather-clad biker, or the fat man? Inspired, Marietta turned to Deb.

"A friend told me about the dance. Guy named Bob. Fortyish, overweight, beer belly, balding." This was the most recent murder victim. "You know him?"

Deb laughed. "Honey, you have just described half of the guys here."

The deejay announced, "Paul Jones time."

"Now you get to dance," Pat told Marietta. "Sort of."

Paul Jones, it turned out, was not a person, but a mixer worthy of a milk shake. Coached by Pat, Marietta joined the women on the dance floor, under the slow swirling of the disco ball. The women circled widdershins around a smaller circle of men moving clockwise. When the music changed, Marietta stopped opposite a reasonably handsome man about her own age. He looked straight at her, then reached for the woman next to her, who was younger and thinner.

Huh. Marietta stood out, feeling very much like the leftovers pushed to the back of the fridge. She wasn't the only one; with her stood a woman from her table. Muriel, said her nametag, its i dotted with a heart, which seemed out of all keeping with her. Arrow-slim and straight, Muriel looked perma-pressed all over despite the wrinkles shirring her face. "Just like high school," she commented crisply,

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with a hard glance at some men slumping nearby, ignoring the leftover women, blankly staring at the couples on the dance floor.

Under the disco ball, the Paul Jones juggernaut wheeled again. This time Marietta slow-danced with halitosis incarnate, escaping gratefully when the music changed. The next go-round she was leftovers. Bill, she noticed, had joined the staring men on the sidelines, ignoring her like the others. Marietta danced next with an attractive man her age who inched his hand toward her butt. She grasped his arm and hoisted it. "Oh, is that the way it is," he complained. Her next partner, a nerdy youngster, seemed to regard her as a maypole to circle around. Eventually the ordeal ended, and she fled to her seat.

"That Bob you mentioned," Deb asked, rejoining her, "is he married?"

Only the fact that she had completely forgotten about Bob kept Marietta from blowing her cover by knowing too much. She had to think, and thinking saved her. "I, uh, don't know him that well. I guess not, since he came here."

"Oh, we have our married singles," Deb said wryly.

"But why? I mean, how do they get in?"

Everyone smiled at her naivety. "Nobody checks," put in the straight-arrow older woman, Muriel. Something about her starchiness made Marietta peg her as a librarian or a head nurse. "People come, people go, nobody cares."

"You can tell when they're married," said Pat. "They come from someplace far away. They want your phone number, but they won't give you theirs."

"Sometimes I think the married ones are the only ones actually trying to connect," said Muriel almost wistfully.

"What's *with* all those guys who just stand and stare?" Marietta asked. "What are they looking at?"

"Easy. They're looking at the boobs bouncing," Muriel said, her tone so undisguisedly bitter that, without meaning to, Marietta gave her a shocked look. Muriel returned the glance, opaque, expressionless. Deb saw, apparently, and interceded.

"Do we seem like the witches in *Macbeth?*" she asked lightly. "Capering in circles?"

"Well, it's hard to keep smiling year after year," Pat put in. "I mean, the brains and experience at this table . . . Deb, you're a lab tech when you're not at the Little Theater, right? And I'm a wellness administrator, Judy drives a truck for UPS, Sue has her own graphic arts business, Muriel is a physician—one of the first female gynecologists in the state."

"Wow," Marietta said on cue, although she was still trying to figure out what a wellness administrator was.

"And there's an astronomer who joins us sometimes," Pat contin-

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ued, "and a movie producer, and—oh, some others who drop out and in, people do that a lot at these singles things. But the point is, the men . . ." Pat seemed to have mislaid the point.

"Boobs," Muriel summed up tersely.

Men were boobs? All men looked for in a woman was boobs? Both of the above?

"What do you do, Mary?" Pat asked.

"I, um, I'm in civil service."

"Postal?"

"Yes. Frequently." They laughed, and talk moved on. Marietta saw that Bill had moved to the dance floor, with the willowy blonde for his partner. The evening blurred. She no longer hoped to dance. With her back to the table she watched the dancers, she watched more men and a few women arriving insouciantly late, she watched the slow wheeling of that dreadful disco ball, hearing snatches of womentalk all around her.

". . . a few drinks before they get here, then more at the bar . . ."

". . . only four grams of fat."

"Premarin and, what's the name of that other stuff that makes you keep having your period till you're ninety?"

". . . do you believe for one moment that guys would get annual dickograms?"

". . . so sweet until we started going steady, and then it was like Dr. Jeckyll and . . ."

". . . can't wait to get home and take them off." Muriel's crisp voice. "The adhesive irritates my skin."

". . . in a big hurry, get it in before they need Viagra . . ."

"Three hours of brisk walking a week . . ."

". . . had sex the day he left me."

The deejay announced, "Time for our second Paul Jones of the evening, folks." Marietta stayed where she was, watching the others get up and form their circle on the floor. Deb, the peacemaker. Pat, so very much the businesswoman. Muriel, brittle and correct and very, very erect, her breasts under her well-fitted shirtwaist dress as pointed as her discourse and nearly as unyielding. This woman had boobs that did not bounce. Not at all.

Beyond her, yet another latecomer male stood in the doorway. He turned toward Marietta, and his glance passed right over her.

Marietta gasped and grabbed at the table as if she were falling. It was her husband.

There he stood with the other men, staring without expression at the dancers. Her George, in the shirt and tie she had bought him for his birthday.

But—it couldn't be. He was working. He always worked late on—

On singles dance nights.

Oh, God.

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For several seconds, all of Marietta's cognitive processes quite simply stopped. When they started again, they proceeded logically and quite coolly; it was this levelheadedness in a crisis that made Marietta a good cop, if anyone would notice. George must not see her, she realized. Because she was undercover, and also because she was his wife, he must not know she was here—but he had not noticed her so far. She sat in near darkness, with her hair dyed and her face masked by way more makeup than she usually wore, and anyway, nothing is more invisible than a middle-aged woman; he probably would not notice her as long as she did not call attention to herself. Better not move.

For the next several moments she sat blending into her environment, watching George watch the boobs bounce, and feeling a cold, covert fury building, building, hardening like an iceberg in her. She had not known she possessed such silent fury.

I hate men. All of them.

"You didn't go out for the Paul Jones?" It was Deb, returning along with the others.

Marietta shook her head.

"You can't get tired already, girl."

Marietta shook her head again. "That man," she said, fixated on George, "I know him. He's married."

Peripherally she saw heads swivel; she had the attention of the whole table. Pat asked, "Which one?"

"In the blue shirt and tie set. Just came in. Name's George."

"George? Oh, yes." It was Muriel. "I know him. He's a regular."

Marietta felt her ice-coolness go glassy sharp. She turned to Muriel. "His wife is the nicest woman," she stage-whispered across the table. "But she had a mastectomy. I guess he's not getting what he wants at home."

This was a lie told for a reason. She watched Muriel's face, but it revealed nothing.

"Did he see you?" Deb asked.

"No, and I don't want him to. I have to get out of here. It's going to be bad enough facing him and his wife. . . ."

"I'll ask him to dance." Deb heaved her black-clad bulk up. "Most of them will dance if you ask them. Anyway, I'll distract him for a minute. You make a run for it."

"Thanks, Deb."

"I guess we won't be seeing you again?" Pat asked as Deb waddled across the room.

"I guess not. No big loss."

"Yes, it is."

"Not for me, I mean. I . . ." She let the thought trail away.

Muriel completed it for her in a voice as dry as dead thistles in winter. "You had hoped for something more from the heart."

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"Right." Marietta looked Muriel straight in the eye, appraising her, then turned away. "Well, I gotta go."

Ducking out the door, Marietta clutched in her mind like a talisman the memory of the deadly bleakness in Muriel's stare.

She thought about George. All the years she had spent cleaning up the popcorn he dropped down the sofa cushions when he was watching TV, sleeping with his snore in her ear, cooking homemade french fries for him. Her husband, a regular. Here. Wearing that shirt and tie.

May he fry in hell.

She wondered whether the men who had been killed were the kind who watched, or the kind who groped, or both.

She wondered which other woman, or women, at that table were carrying pistols in their purses.

Darting across the too-brightly lighted hallway, she found refuge in the ladies' room. After making sure she was alone, she reached into her purse and pulled out one of the boy-toys in there. She pressed a button to activate a vibrator hidden inside Bill's belt, alerting him that she needed to talk with him.

"There's a guy who knows me in there," she told him in the safety of the parking lot a few minutes later.

"Well, let's call it off for tonight, then. I'll talk with the captain. Crusher be damned, I don't see any guys in there who look like they can bench-press me. I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere."

No wonder he wasn't getting anywhere, Marietta thought as she settled into her car to wait, as she watched Bill drive away. Guys didn't talk to one another the way women did. And anyway, Bill was operating on the wrong premise. Maybe she ought to have suggested to him that a mammography machine was quite a powerful kind of press, and that two or more women working together could maneuver a guy into it very nicely, thank you.

But nah. He'd just laugh at her. And anyway, she wanted to wait and see.

It wouldn't happen tonight, probably. Not if they had any sense of caution. But the chill, furious beauty of Marietta's situation, she considered, was that she didn't have to do a thing about George except smile as usual. Keep cleaning up the popcorn, sleeping through the snore, boiling the oil for his precious fries. Smile, and have faith in the force she had set in motion.

Hazily Marietta thought of a glacier grinding its massive, icy way down a lonesome valley of betrayed dreams, then of gigantic wheels turning with monstrous pressing power. Once upon a time there had been a huge, heavy cart that had borne the idol of some Hindu god, crushing the faithful beneath its implacable tread. She wondered what deity they had been worshiping, poor fools. Wondered whether it had been the incarnation of love. ●

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The Pleasant Hills Murders

by Percy Spurlark Parker

Percy Spurlark Parker has an unusual range in the mystery genre: He can write everything from the coziest of closed-circle cozies, as instanced by the following story, to the toughest of meanstreets tales, as seen in his *EQMM* series featuring Big Bull Benson, a southside Chicago bar owner who always seems to operate on the edge of the law. Even if you prefer Mr. Parker in hard-boiled mode, we think you'll enjoy this tale.

Morris was the first to die. It was yesterday, Sunday, just after lunch. There wasn't much alarm. We were all saddened, of course, but he was eighty-seven years old.

Amanda passed away last night. It was understandable. She and Morris had been very close since she arrived here at Pleasant Hills Retirement Estates. She had always been frail, and the strain of Morris's death was simply too much for her.

But this morning, when Darlene was found dead, I knew we had a killer among us.

"Come on, Mom. Let's be a little more practical about this. None of these people were in very good health. It's just the way things worked out."

My son is a sergeant for our county police department. His father had been the police chief for the last eleven years of his life. And like his father, Steve has the hardest time accepting my views on crime.

"Three heart attacks, Steve? Please. It's murder, I tell you."

We were in my apartment in the left wing of the building complex. The left wing was the healthy wing, or as healthy as you could be at seventy plus. Medication in this wing ran from aspirins and antacids to nitroglycerin spray. The right wing was set up for people who needed more care. The pharmacy and doctors' and nurses' stations were all in the right wing. The center wing was just that, people who needed more medical attention

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than the left wing, but not as much as those in the right.

The residents of all wings intermingled. Pleasant Hills offered an array of daily activities—movies, bingo, arts and crafts, the bridge club, and a dinner dance in the main hall every weekend. Morris and Amanda had both had apartments in the center wing. Darlene's apartment had been on the floor below mine.

"Mom, you've just got to put this out of your mind."

"I'm not wrong about this."

Steve had been one of the policemen responding to the discovery of Darlene's body. He paced the floor before me in his dark gray uniform as I sat on the sofa. He had my dimples but his father's long lanky frame and dusky hair. "Okay, three people dying in such a short period of time is a little unusual. But we've found no evidence of murder. They were just . . ."

"Old," I finished his sentence for him.

"Look, Mom, I didn't mean . . ."

I waved him off. "I know exactly what you meant. I'm old and they were old and I just don't want to think my time could be coming soon, so I blame their deaths on something else. Wrong. It wouldn't make a difference if I was on my death bed, or knew I had another twenty years to live. Somebody has murdered three people, two of whom were very dear to me."

Steve gave up arguing. Let the old lady have her folly, he probably thought. She couldn't cause much trouble, and she certainly wasn't going to uncover any murderer.

Well, we'll just see about that.

I got pen and paper after Steve left and started making some notes for myself. The nursing staff made regular rounds dispensing medication, conducting therapy sessions, and generally watching over the Pleasant Hills population. Tom Ashler wore two hats for Pleasant Hills, pharmacist and activities director. He'd been looking for Morris to discuss starting a gin-rummy tournament when he discovered Morris's body. Myra Post, Amanda's next-door neighbor, found her when she went to check on her after Amanda didn't show up for dinner. And Nurse Scott, a dreadful woman most of the time, had happened upon Darlene's body this morning.

All three were found in their apartments, and the doctors on duty, not looking for anything else, had determined the deaths to be due to heart failure.

After about fifteen minutes I had more scratches on the pad than any real notes, but I was still determined to prove to Steve I was right. Motive and opportunity. It was something my husband used to preach. If a motive could be matched with whoever had the opportunity to commit the crime, then there was a very good chance that person was the culprit. *All well and good, but how do I go about it?* His words came to me then, in that deep, matter-of-fact

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way he had of speaking: "Just start from the beginning, Ethel."

Pleasant Hills was a four-story, semicircular building sitting in the middle of a five-acre parcel of land. Each window offered a view of rolling countryside, glorious in the summer with its lush green grass and heavily leaved trees, magical in the winter with the gentle fall of snowflakes. Morris's apartment was on the third floor rear, next to the emergency exit. His door was unlocked, which was mildly disappointing. Many years ago, as a lark, my husband had taught me how to pick locks, and I didn't get too many opportunities to keep in practice.

I spent an hour searching, looking for anything out of the ordinary, something that might be considered a clue. The only thing I found was a list of names in a spiral notebook. The list was ten or twelve pages back into the book, something that might have been missed if the book was casually flipped through. Amanda's name headed the list, but Darlene and I didn't make it somehow; in fact, there was no one from the left wing of the building on the list at all.

I took the notebook with me when I left the apartment. I wasn't sure why Morris had compiled the list, but I felt it was important. Anyway, taking it made me feel like I'd done more than ransacked Morris's apartment. I'd found a clue. Or at least I hoped so. Of course, I realized I could have nothing more than Morris's Christmas list.

I ran into Tom Ashler at the central bank of elevators.

"Kind of early for you, isn't it, Tom?" I rarely saw him in the building before two o'clock, and never on a Monday, since Monday and Tuesday were his days off.

"Pharmacy inventory; it's a pain but I've got to do it once a month, keep the ledgers straight. And with all that's gone on, I thought I'd hang around a bit. See if I can get everybody thinking about something else. Morale's a big part of my job, you know."

I'd always thought Tom to be about the same age as Steve. I guess most of the residents treated him as their son, especially when he was serving as activities director. He normally had a quick grin to accompany his pale blue eyes and broad face. But it seemed to take a lot of effort for him to get the grin to show now.

"It's really been some two days," he said, looking at the floor more than at me. "Morris, Amanda, and now Darlene." He shook his head.

"It doesn't seem real," I added.

A frown grappled with the grin and won out. "It's the same way I've been feeling. I've been in this business for some time, but I guess you never get used to death when it's someone you know."

"I've never been able to, Tom."

He sighed, nodded. "Look, if there's anything I can do . . . If you need anything to help you sleep tonight, I can get the okay from

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one of the doctors."

"No thanks, Tom, I'll be all right."

The door to Amanda's apartment was unlocked also; I put my hairpin away and went in. I had searched through Morris's things somewhat detachedly, but going through Amanda's belongings, the sense of loss got a good hold on me. She was such a genuinely dear person, and I had counted her as a true friend.

She suffered badly with arthritic knees. She was mobile, but rarely totally pain-free. She had her good days and bad, but her spirit was out there ten feet tall for everyone to grab hold of and be lifted up by.

I found Amanda's diary on the top shelf of her closet. I almost missed it at first; it was tucked back into a corner. At first I wasn't going to touch it, but then after some arguing with myself I got it down and began to skim through it. She wrote of how fond she was of Morris, and of how lucky she was to've found herself a place here at Pleasant Hills. She wrote of our friendship and I had to stop reading for a moment to get my handkerchief and wipe my eyes before I could continue. She was having a problem of late. Her medication didn't seem to be helping her as much as it had in the past, especially during the latter part of the week. She wrote that she'd mentioned it to Morris and he'd suggested she might need her dosage increased, something she feared might dull her senses, which overmedication can do.

The last entry was made a little over a week ago. Carelessly scrawled, and without explanation, it said, "Darlene threatened to kill me."

I started to run to the phone and call Steve. I was eager for the chance to say, I told you so. But what did I have? Had Darlene somehow killed Amanda and Morris and then had a heart attack herself? I guess it could happen, but it would really be stretching plausibility.

I went to Darlene's apartment next, taking Morris's notebook and Amanda's diary with me. Darlene's door was unlocked also; it seemed my lock-picking skills were destined to lie dormant.

Darlene certainly wasn't the neat and tidy person Amanda had been. There wasn't a single item folded in her dresser drawers, and there seemed to be just as many clothes on her closet floor as there were on hangers. But there was a small locked box on the shelf of her nightstand.

I got my hairpin out and popped the lock on my first try; my husband would have been proud. The box was full of old photos, and seeing the fashions of the thirties again brought back warm memories. I could remember the Sunday socials, picnics by the lake.

It took awhile before I recognized the thin blonde who appeared in most of the photos, but it was Darlene with heavy makeup and a

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big smile. The unsettling aspect was the men Darlene was posing with. There was a coldness about their expressions, even though a few of them tried smiles. They all seemed to be posing for mug shots.

Were they gangsters? Had Darlene been, what was it they used to call them, a gun moll? It could be; she had never been too free with information about her past. And she did have a rather crusty edge about her.

The thought of Darlene running with criminals was fascinating. It would probably take me weeks to go through old newspapers and police records. But would I be any closer to knowing who the murderer was? I doubted it. Something in Darlene's past could have reached out and caused her death, but how could it have involved Morris and Amanda?

I'd been sitting on the bed while I was looking at the photos. I put them back into the box, closed it, and was about to replace the box on the nightstand when I bumped it into something under the pillow. I pulled the pillow back, and there lay a crude little handgun, dull blue in color. Had Darlene always slept with a gun under her pillow? Once a gun moll, always a gun moll?

Nurse Scott, the nurse who found Darlene, and Amanda's next-door neighbor, Myra Post, were both in the main dining hall at lunch break. Nurse Scott was seated by herself, as usual, so I cornered her first.

"She was in bed when I came by to give her her medication this morning. She's always been a sound sleeper. I didn't know anything was wrong until I tried to wake her."

Nurse Scott was a big woman, a forty-year-old spinster with an attitude to match. Gentle was a foreign word to her. One of the nicer things we residents said about her was that we'd rather give blood to Dracula than have Nurse Scott take it.

A single curl of hair sprouted from the mole on the right side of her mouth. She scratched at it with her thumbnail. "Three people in two days. Makes you wonder which one of you is going to be next."

Subtlety was another word Nurse Scott knew nothing of.

"Yes, well," I said, "Darlene was never really close to anyone around here that I can think of, can you?"

"Naw, I can't think of anyone she was buddy-buddy with."

"Any visitors?"

She thought for a moment. "None that I can recall."

"Ever hear anything negative about her? Anybody around here who really didn't like her?"

"Just what are you getting at?" Nurse Scott asked. She frowned, and it was somewhat of an improvement.

"Oh, nothing," I said quickly. I'd made no secret of my family ties with the police department. I might even have been boastful. I'm very proud of my son and late husband, and have told perfect

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strangers the same.

"You don't think she was murdered?" Nurse Scott said. "That they all were murdered?"

I could just about hear her thinking. There were a couple of padded rooms in the basement of the right wing and she was probably sizing me up for one.

"I was just curious," I said.

"Your curiosity wouldn't be running toward mercy killing, would it? I'm sure you're aware some nurses have actually done that?"

"Well, yes," I said, although it was a direction I hadn't contemplated until now.

"You wouldn't be thinking I'm capable of such an act, would you?"

"Mercy killing? You? No, not at all." Mercy was another word not associated with Nurse Scott.

"Good. I don't expect to hear any more of this."

"You're right, of course," I said, excusing myself and moving on to Myra's table.

"Amanda and Darlene weren't speaking," Myra said, adding much too much salt to her mashed potatoes.

"I wasn't aware of that."

Myra gave a little hunch of her thin shoulders. "Well, with Darlene it might have been a little difficult to tell. She wasn't the most outgoing person, so if she wasn't speaking to you it could just be her way, or she might be hating you with a passion."

Thinking about it, I had to agree with her assessment. Darlene was here at Pleasant Hills when I moved in two years ago. She was cordial enough, although I usually had to speak first. "Any idea why they weren't speaking?"

"Sure," Myra said, shoveling a hefty forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth. She was small, but she ate about twice as much at a sitting as anyone else at Pleasant Hills. "Morris," she finally said, after getting the mashed potatoes down. "Morris had been asking around about how everyone has been feeling lately. Everybody I know has been doing okay. Same old aches and pains, but nothing special. I guess he spent a longer time in Darlene's room than Amanda thought he should. They had a little confrontation and hadn't spoken since."

Amanda hadn't told me about her spat with Darlene. It explained the entry in her diary. She probably hadn't gone into details because she didn't want to admit, even to herself, that she had started the whole thing out of jealousy. It happens all the time; people say things one minute, and then think better of it the next.

But if she'd never gotten back to Darlene to smooth things over, then the bad feelings would still be out there. What would that mean? The double murder and Darlene dies of a heart attack theory again? Or, maybe a double murder and a suicide. No, it seemed

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to me there was another answer.

Myra scooped up some more potatoes on her fork. "You know, I wish they'd use real potatoes instead of substituting this instant stuff; there's no real body to it."

"The whole world's going synthetic," I agreed. "Substitute this, substitute that. Everything's geared up to give you less for more money."

With another mouthful of potatoes, all Myra could do was nod, but I had gotten the germ of an idea. I checked Morris's notebook. There were at least a half-dozen people in the lunchroom who'd made his list. It took me only a few minutes to learn that they, like Amanda, hadn't been feeling quite up to snuff of late.

I was back in my apartment and I had everything almost all figured out when I heard the knock on the door.

Tom stood there smiling, the Pleasant Hills poster boy himself. "I got a message you wanted to see me about the gin-rummy tournament?"

"Well, that's not exactly true," I said, stepping back, allowing him into my apartment. I waved a hand toward the sofa, and we both sat down.

"If this is not about the tourn—" he started.

"It's not," I interrupted. "I only used that to get you up here."

He looked at me very hard then; his blue eyes seemed to darken, then he glanced around the room. I'd closed the door behind him when he came in, and the doors to both my bathroom and bedroom were closed also.

"I know why you killed Morris and Amanda, but why Darlene?"

His grin had never been as quick or as full. "You're joking. How could you get such a wild idea?"

Myra had actually made it jell for me when we'd gotten on the topic of substituting food. "You're in charge of the pharmacy, Tom. You take care of ordering the medication and preparing most of it for dispensing throughout the complex, except for Monday and Tuesday when you're generally off-duty. The times you were on duty, some of the people around here hadn't been feeling their normal selves."

"Okay, so what does that mean?"

"You know as well as I do, Tom. You're skimping on the medication. You're either substituting cheaper medication or dispensing lower doses, or a combination of both, and pocketing the difference. You've probably been getting away with it for some time. A quarter off this prescription, fifty cents off the next. It adds up. But like my husband used to say, most crooks get tripped up by greed. You kept stealing more and more until it became noticeable something was wrong."

He shook his head. The smile was still there, but it had begun to

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fade. "Look, I know the deaths have got everyone upset, but believe me, you're making a mistake."

"No mistakes, Tom. Amanda left a diary. Her medication wasn't working properly on the days you were on duty. She complained to Morris; he asked around, made a list of people who had the same problem. He either spoke to you about it or confronted you with it, and you killed him. Then you killed Amanda just in case Morris had told her of any suspicions he might have had about you. But that brings us back to my original question: Why Darlene?"

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Why should I when I'm right?"

"They left a diary and a list of names?"

The diary and notebook were on the coffee table and I nodded toward them.

He glanced over to them, back to me, shrugged. "Damn, this thing really snowballed. Thought I'd covered my tracks pretty well." He paused. "I killed Darlene because she saw me kill Amanda. Slipped into the apartment while I was there. I would have done her then, too, but the old bag pulled a gun on me. Turns out Morris had questioned her about her medication and told her about the others. When I reported finding Morris dead, she pegged me as the bad guy. Kept tabs on me. Followed me when I went into Amanda's room.

"She was going to blackmail me. I pretended to go along with her, but I paid her a visit late last night when she was asleep. I thought I was finished, but I guess I can't stop just yet." He took a hypodermic out of his pocket, removed the plastic sleeve that covered the needle. "A little air in the blood stream; it's not entirely painless, but when that bubble of air hits the heart it's pretty quick. I had to knock Morris out in order to give him his little shot. With Amanda, I told her it was something to settle her nerves. I hope you don't try to struggle, it'll be easier on both of us."

There was no trace of a grin on his face now. His eyes grew narrow, penetrating. The thumping of my heart echoed throughout me. I wanted to run, but I couldn't seem to get my legs moving. He grabbed for me. I pulled back—too slow. He had my wrist; the needle thrust forward.

"Freeze," Steve shouted as he and two uniformed policemen rushed from my bedroom. Naturally, I knew they were there, listening and waiting for Tom to condemn himself, but the knowledge hadn't stopped me from getting nervous.

Later, after I'd stopped shaking and was on my second cup of tea, Steve said, "Do you want the apology in writing?"

I tried to tone down my smile. "No, that's all right, dear. Your father never acknowledged it, either. But at least now you know how most of his cases were solved." ●

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The Confession of Nathan Baytown

by William Bankier

In light of the recent resurgence of interest in jazz following the airing of PBS's 17-hour series on the subject, it may be worth noting that William Bankier has been celebrating jazz for nearly forty years in his stories for *EQMM*. According to Ellery Queen, "No one in the genre writes about music better than William Bankier." And Mr. Bankier's favorite musical form is jazz. This new tale recalls the Symphony Sid Show and the Montreal World's Fair.

On the summer of '67, Montreal was a cauldron of creative energy brought to the boil by a World's Fair and the influx of people arriving from everywhere to perform and celebrate.

Late one afternoon, Nathan Cullen stepped down from a bus at the Dorchester terminus, collected his duffel bag, and walked up Peel Street to the Central YMCA on Drummond. It was a great feeling to be back in the city, although, truth be told, he remembered almost nothing from his previous visit several years ago. That had been a bad time in his life. Not that these days were good. The manager of the hotel in Baytown had fired him recently from his job on the desk, even though the doctors at the Ontario Hospital in Kingston had pronounced him fully recovered from his breakdown and ready to work. It was not fair.

Nathan thought about the notebook in his bag, which contained his work in progress. It was reassuring to remember the narrative poem he was writing. Optimism rose in him as he steamed past the Rymark Tavern and the International News on his way to the Y.

"You were wise to write ahead for a reservation, Mr. Cullen," the boozy-faced old man said as he pushed a key across the desk. The troll in charge of slamming the steel doors of the elevator appeared to be crazier than anybody Nathan had encountered in

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the hospital ward. Room 624 was the size of a broom closet but so clean and neat it lifted his spirits even further. He was freed now for a time from the disorder of the family dwelling back in Baytown.

He raised the window and peered down onto Stanley Street. People were coming to and going from the Carousel Cafe. The city hummed and roared, and he could smell the river a couple of miles away.

The room contained a small table and a straight-backed chair. Nathan found his notebook and pen in the bag and sat down to work. He read aloud the opening stanza, written at home weeks ago:

"This story begins in the affluent, elegant fifties,
When money is loose and a bachelor spends what he has.
The Montreal girls are all perfume and nylon and lipstick,
And 'How High the Moon' is the national anthem of jazz."

Coincidentally, through the open window, the exuberant beat of a jazz band could be heard playing some distance away. The sound was far from bad. Nathan had been an afficionado since his teens. Somewhere amid the dust and confusion of the Baytown home, his collection of 78s remained. Many's the time he had lain on his bed as if drugged, listening to the famous Jazz at the Philharmonic concert with Flip Phillips playing chorus after chorus of "Perdido." And in fragrant darkness, with his sister out late and his mother asleep in her chair downstairs, Nathan would lie with his cheek close to the radio's green glow, catching the faint sounds of *The Symphony Sid Show*, the all-night, all-frantic one where things were crazy on 'JZ.

Now he went to the window and leaned head and shoulders into open air. The band was playing off to his right, somewhere behind the tall buildings. A tenor solo ended and a crowd of people cheered and clapped and whistled. It was too much; Nathan was Ulysses with nobody to bind him to the mast. Grabbing jacket and wallet and key, he left the room, chose not to wait for the elevator, ran down several flights of stairs, and shot himself into the street.

He found the jazz band in Place Ville Marie. People filled the broad square beside the new cruciform building. Nathan edged his way through to the rim of the crowd. Eight musicians were seated on a scattering of folding chairs, playing without charts. Fronting them was a tall man in a greenish tartan jacket over white slacks and shiny black loafers. Corn-silk hair framed a cadaverous face decorated with dark bomber glasses from the most recent world war.

The tune was an up-tempo version of "There Will Never Be

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Another You." The leader led with body language. His choreography was dynamic, closely connected with the music. He would take a series of bent-kneed steps as the band blew unison chords, then pivot a full circle in time to end up pointing with both index fingers at the trumpet player who began to solo.

When the song ended and the crowd was applauding, Nathan found the leader close enough to be spoken to. "Great arrangement," he projected.

The leader took off his shades and fixed the visitor with a blue-eyed stare. "Fine ear," he said.

"And your trombonist plays like Bob Brookmeyer."

"Stick around. I'll buy you a drink."

They walked across the street to the bar downstairs under CIL House. The trombone player, whose name was Milton Mills, came with them. The leader had introduced himself as Stan Biriac. He said, over giant martinis which the waiter called "Atlantic Oceans," "This is a miracle gig. But it's only good for the duration of Expo. We fold in September. Meanwhile, we play here or we play over at the Fair."

"Tell him how you got the job," Mills prompted. "Bring in Rosa Tregale."

Nathan Cullen was not supposed to consume large amounts of alcohol. It did not mix well with his medication. Never mind, he was here in a dim lounge with these exciting guys and he was floating on a wave of euphoria. Far better than the head stuffed with cotton wool which came with his daily dosage of tranks.

"Ah yes, the enchanting Rosa Tregale," Biriac said. "She is the only daughter of the owner of the biggest brokerage house on St. James Street. Rosa put a word in Daddy's ear before he and his old lady took off for Europe to escape this year's summer madness. Tregale called the mayor, who spoke to the head of the musician's union, and the job was mine."

"It's not what you play, it's who," Mills said.

"Ignore the cynicism of my African-Canadian colleague. Milton Mills is only here because, as history tells us, jazz came up the St. Lawrence River from Nova Scotia."

"And I came with it." Mills pointed at the empty glasses and gave the waiter a wink.

"I don't care how you got the job," Nathan said. "It sounded to me like you're the right man." The Baytowner excused himself and went to the men's room.

"I see an opportunity here," Biriac said.

"Like what?"

"This guy is a clueless individual. Obviously. I suggest we take

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him up to Rosa's house and persuade her to let him stay for a few days."

"Rosa persuades real good."

"We've been looking at some fine silver belonging to her old man. We intend to lift it, right? Sell it and split the income?"

Milton's face was serious. "I blame society for not paying musicians enough."

"We take the stuff on the night before Nathan ends his visit. After he leaves, we point out the missing silver and finger him. Let the cops go after the innocent party. It's what they do best."

Nathan was on his way back from the men's room, weaving between tables. Biriac noted his radiant face and the too-short pant legs. "One more thing," he murmured. "I don't have to worry about Rosa leaving with him."

As he sat down, Nathan said, "My round. Where'd that waiter get to?"

"Not now," Biriac said. "We're on our way up to the big house beside the mountain. You're about to meet Rosa Tregale."

The radio was playing as Rosa carried drinks from an alcove with a bay window that framed the climbing green slope of Mount Royal. It was an instrumental ballad and she sang along with it in a whispering contralto that was perfectly on key. "I should care . . . I should let it upset me . . ."

"Dig the vocalist," Nathan said as he accepted a glass of beer.

"Thank you, kind sir." Rosa was no bigger than a precocious child. She had a broad face with heavy-lidded eyes, and waves of auburn hair spilled across her shoulders.

"Oh, she sings," Biriac said in an offhand way. "And she cooks. And she sews. She does everything a man could desire."

"You should use her with the band. She could be your June Christie."

"Stop turning her head. The kid doesn't even read music."

Milton Mills murmured, "Get back on your white horse, Nathan Baytown. And ride."

"Don't you go anywhere," Stan said. "Stay here. Rosa's got plenty of room."

Rosa took her tray back to the kitchen. She called, "Can you come in here a minute, Stan?" When he joined her, she said quietly, "You put me on the spot."

"Asking the guy to stay?"

"In front of him. No discussion. What am I supposed to say?"

"Light of my life," Biriac said. "Sweetheart of all my dreams." He grasped her shoulders. "There is a fraternity of jazz lovers. Strangers can meet and they may be very different people, but when it emerges that both have been following the swing bands,

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from however great a distance, they become brothers in music. Can you understand that?"

"You're so full of baloney."

"When we were drinking, know what he told me? He said 'How High the Moon' was the national anthem of jazz."

"I've heard that one."

"My point exactly. What say you, child of a noble race?"

"He can stay for a couple of days."

"That's all I ask."

When Rosa came back and made the invitation official, Nathan said, "It sure beats the Central Y."

"Get your stuff and move in. For a few days."

Stan Biriac fished car keys from the tartan jacket and tossed them to his trombone player. "Drive young Nathan over to Drummond Street, let him gather his pathetic possessions, and bring him back here to Rosa's ashram." As the pair of them left the room, Biriac flung after them, "Do de name Slam Stewart strike a familiar note?"

The departing Nathan pointed a finger skyward as he replied, "Bass player. Benny Goodman sextet."

The living quarters assigned to Nathan comprised a studio bedroom and adjoining bathroom, each with a view of the city below. Rosa showed him the layout with a sweet pride that included some shyness. "If you want anything . . ."

"I want you to sing with the band."

"Never happen. Stan is an elitist. He has all these top-flight pros. He's one himself on piano. I'm just somebody who likes to sing. Zero credentials."

"Hey, a desk by the window! I can do my writing here."

"You're a writer?"

"Like you, no credentials. I do it because I like it. And because I can." He took his notebook from the duffel bag and slapped it down on the polished oak surface. "My work in progress."

"Can I look?" She opened the notebook and turned a few pages. She read aloud:

"'Your hair is like silk,' he intoned as he thrust his fingers into her auburn waves.
'We're out here alone like two lovers marooned in a boat.'
He dragged back her head and her eyes became wild for an instant.
As, deftly, the blade drew a ruby-red arc on her throat."

"My goodness," she said. She turned the page.

"You like?"

"It's powerful."

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"It's a narrative poem. I'm not sure where it's going, but it will be lengthy." He turned pages. "This is as far as I've got." His voice took on a musical lilt as he read aloud:

"They walked arm in arm through the afternoon crowd on Ste. Catherine.
A breeze from the mountain did things with her strawberry hair.
A boy selling tabloids cried headlines of murder at midnight.
It seemed Montrealers were facing a night-stalker scare."

Rosa drifted to the doorway. "I'll let you get on with your work. We eat around seven."

Rejoining the others, she said, "He's writing this long poem. There's a notebook half full of verses very neatly printed."

"Is it good?"

"I think so. But creepy. It's about murder."

Biriac adopted a sarcastic tone. "Persuade him to turn it into lyrics and you can sing it with the band. Like opera."

After dinner, which turned out to be buckets of chicken ordered in by telephone and washed down with more beer, Stan said, "Some of us have to work. Shift your frame, Milton."

Rosa said, "Where are you playing tonight?"

"La Ronde."

"Come on, Nathan. It's a beautiful night."

On the way out of the house, Stan waved at a glass cabinet as he said to Nathan, "Dig all the silver. Rosa's father used to play tennis." He opened the cabinet door, removed a large trophy, and handed it to Nathan.

"He was pretty good." Rosa's pride was subdued.

"Pretty good? I saw him take a set from Tony Trabert in the Open." Nathan was holding the trophy aloft in a victory salute. Biriac snatched it from him. "You don't get to keep it, kid." He replaced it and closed the glass door.

The amusement park on its man-made island in the St. Lawrence was a popular venue at the World's Fair. On the lagoon, a ramshackle raft propelled by two outboard motors blasted raucous rock-and-roll as it transported revellers on circuits from the loading dock and back again.

Biriac's band had better stuff to offer. They set up inside a small amphitheater with the crowd occupying rising rows of benches on all four sides. As the band kicked in with "All the Things You Are" played at a ferocious tempo, Rosa joined Nathan where he was seated, bringing with her two cones of soft ice cream. During an interlude between numbers, they talked.

"Yes, I was in Montreal once before. Years ago, the late fifties. I

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don't remember it. I was getting sick at the time and when I went home I had a breakdown. I was in the hospital for a few months. When I came out, it was all a blank."

"I'm sorry you were sick."

"Manic-depression. It's in the family. From mother's side. My sister has a mild case of it."

"What's her name?"

"Leila. She lives in Toronto. I haven't seen her in years. We're not a close family."

"That's a shame."

"I scared her off. She didn't want to be around me."

In the morning, Nathan arose at dawn. He sat at the table by the window and worked on his poem. The stanzas flowed from his pen. When he worked best, he was not aware of time or surroundings. Reality fell away. The pen raced over the paper and the lines arrived from some region beyond a barrier in his brain.

He feared to have friends from his hometown come here to the city.
He had to be free to pursue his anonymous schemes.
His blood-lust had taken him over; he could not control it . . .
Unless his deplorable actions were nothing but dreams.

The pen poured line after line onto the pages.
Some time later he wrote:

Her eyes, which were dead, had been ringed with a thick smear of shadow.
Her hair was a garden of fragrance they call potpourri.
Her blood was so warm, when he nuzzled her throat he could smell it.
He told her, "You're lucky you happened to run into me."

The house came to life. There was clattering in the kitchen leading to the aroma of coffee. He emerged from his studio, eyes glowing, creative energy radiating from him with an intensity that was vaguely alarming.

"I can really work here. This is a hell of a place. This is the center of my universe. Mmmm, thanks Rosa, great coffee. Here comes Milton, morning Milt, grab a pew. And how are you, Stanley Biriac. Lord Stanley. The band was so great last night. Talk about a sound! Don't split when the Fair is over. Stay together and tour. Rent a bus. Hell, buy one. I'll be your roadie. First stop, Baytown. We could sell out the Arena, no problem. End of the war, all the big bands came through Baytown. Ellington. Hampton. Tommy Dorsey. I stood in the doorway of the Coronet Hotel and watched Buddy de Franco and Boomy Richmond walk out of the Paragon

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Cafe and head over to the Arena. I was a bellboy then. Before I became a desk clerk."

"Nathan?"

"Yes, Stan?"

"Shut up."

Milton Mills laughed. "Nathan Baytown is flying today!"

"Am I going on too much? I'm sorry. It happens. I get in my manic phase and I can't stop. I know it bothers people, but I feel great. And boy, can I work. I must have produced thirty stanzas this morning."

"Stop talking, Nathan."

Rosa took him by the arm. "Come in the kitchen. We'll have our coffee in there."

Rosa made a picnic. After Stan and Milton headed away to perform band duties, she and Nathan drove in her car to a parking area halfway up Mount Royal. Then they walked through a pine grove to the grassy slopes around Beaver Lake. There, Nathan spread a blanket as Rosa unpacked cold chicken, French bread, salad, two glasses, and a bottle of wine.

"I think Stan is jealous of you," she said.

"I've been told to blat down before. One time I talked a whole evening without a break. My poor sister started crying. The hell of it is, I come down off this high and then I stop talking altogether. I go dead silent for days. That's when they take me down to Kingston."

"I mean, he thinks of me as his woman," Rosa persisted. "One of his women, I should say."

"Stan has a lot of girls?"

"Are you kidding? Fronting that band? He has to beat them off with a stick."

"I had a girl before I went to Montreal that first time. I came back and they put me away for six months. I told you about my blackout. When the hospital discharged me and I came home, she'd gone with somebody else."

"More fool, she." Nathan was lying on his back, clasped hands propping his head. Rosa leaned down and kissed his cheek, then lay beside him.

Later, she said, "Let's not go to the Fair tonight."

"Stan won't like it."

"Stan can lump it. Let's do something different."

Stan played it dignified, but they could tell he hated Rosa's independent plans. When he and Milt had tanked up on beer and spaghetti, when they had driven away in his sedan, which had seen better days, Rosa called a taxi.

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The cab deposited the couple on Ste. Catherine Street amid cinemas and clubs. They decided against a movie and went upstairs at the Copa. There was a fine busy crowd in here. The couple enjoyed two drinks with head-to-head conversation.

Nathan wanted jazz, so they walked past Peel Street to Ciro's. Up more stairs into dim surroundings where they heard a tenor saxophonist who was not that far behind Stan Getz. On the way back down, Rosa slipped on the carpeted steps and he saved her by grabbing a hand and sliding his arm around her waist. He half carried her pressed against him all the way to the street.

His jazz-hunger not satisfied, Nathan suggested Cafe St. Michel, so they hailed a taxi and rode down the hill to St. Antoine Street. The music here was the real thing, it was 52nd Street North. Rosa was watching her companion's enjoyment, observing him as inner light poured from his face while Louis Metcalfe played "Round Midnight" on his trumpet.

Outside again, Nathan said, "This is so weird. With you tonight, in this place, I feel such a sense of déjà vu."

"Maybe you were here on your other visit."

"Maybe I was." He took her hand and led her across the street. "Come with me. There's one more place."

She read the sign as they went inside. "The Blue Ridge. I've never heard of it."

"I saw something about it in the paper. Trust me."

There was a trio on stage. They were good. The same could not be said of the young man at the microphone. He was having trouble getting through the song. She said, "This is amateur night."

"He's weak, but you'll be great. Sit here. Order me a beer." Nathan found the MC and spoke with him. The man wrote down Rosa's name. Nathan joined her at a far table.

"What are you doing to me?" she wailed. But Rosa was stimulated by the drinks and the music. She was ready for anything. When the MC called her name and the crowd, who had come for blood sports, produced exaggerated applause, she walked purposefully forward and spoke to the piano player. He played chords in a few keys. They found one that suited her range and she went to the microphone. The trio played a gentle introduction and, spot on at the entrance, Rosa began to sing in her sweet, husky voice.

"Long ago and far away, I dreamed a dream one day,
And now that dream is here beside me . . ."

All conversation ceased in the smoky room. This was not just another in the parade of pathetic amateurs. Here was somebody born to sing. Rosa finished to an ovation. Back at the table, Nathan stood to embrace her. "See? You can do it!"

"That felt good."

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"It was great. Don't listen to Stan. Don't turn your back on your life."

The Expo bandleader was home ahead of them. Rosa and Nathan arrived in a euphoric state. Stan was reclining on the sofa with a glass and a whiskey bottle on the coffee table beside him.

"You should have heard this girl tonight," Nathan said.

"We were in the Blue Ridge. I sang with the trio."

"She was totally professional. The manager asked her back." Then Nathan noticed his notebook lying open on Stan's chest.

"Excuse me if I don't respond," Stan said. "What is this misery you've been writing?"

Rosa said, "You have no right to go spying in Nathan's room."

But Nathan felt a strange current of satisfaction at somebody observing what he had done. "It's all right."

"Listen to this." Stan began to read.

"Facedown on the bed, she awaited her customer's pleasure.
He played with the buttons that fastened the back of her gown.
Then, vaulting astride her, he grappled her hair with his fingers.
He fractured her neck, then he lowered the lifeless girl down."

"That's enough," Rosa said.

"It gets better." Stan read on.

"He turned the girl over and bit her three times on the shoulder,
Then licked up the rusty solution that mottled her skin.
Two feelings assailed him; relief and an awful depression.
He promised abstention, and now was the time to begin."

Nathan had lowered himself into a chair. His head was hanging, his eyes were closed. He began to recite in a monotone:

"Pale dawn filled the streets as he walked up the hill from St. Antoine.
He saw between buildings, high up on the mountain, the Cross.
'It's nothing but iron and rivets,' he told himself grimly.
'And one weary prostitute less is no earthshaking loss.'"

Rosa advanced on Stan and snatched the notebook from his hands. She gave it back to Nathan, who held it against his chest. Stan was up now, bottle and glass in hands, pouring himself another drink. "It was a mistake asking this guy to stay here."

"He's right," Nathan mumbled.

"Freeloading freak. It's time for you to go."

"This is my house," Rosa said. "I'm the one who tells people to go."

"Are you evicting me?" Stan said.

"Maybe I am."

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Nathan got up. "Excuse me." Moving like a zombie, bumping against furniture, he went to the studio and closed the door. Standing with his back against the panel, he could hear the angry dialogue from the other room.

"The guy is a serial killer. He must have been in town a few years ago when those murders took place. They were never solved."

Rosa said nothing.

"And what's with tasting the blood? He's a vampire."

"He's a writer. He makes it up."

"You think that? You really think it? You're dumber than I thought. I'm calling the police."

"Don't even think about it."

"Get rid of him, Rosa. And count the silver when he's gone."

"Get out. I don't want you here."

Nathan heard sounds of a struggle. A table fell over. Something fragile smashed on the floor. Then a hand struck flesh and Rosa screamed. Nathan opened the door and went back into the room. He saw Stan with his fingers in Rosa's hair, pulling her head down. He swung a fist and struck her repeatedly on shoulders and arms. Nathan's eyes went to an iron poker leaning against the brick facade of the fireplace. He went there quickly, picked up the poker, approached Stan from behind, and brought the implement down hard twice, three times on the back of his head. The bandleader collapsed, releasing Rosa.

The room was quiet. Nathan's breathing sounded loud. Rosa knelt beside the unconscious man. She examined him. "He's alive. He's bleeding."

"You need to call an ambulance."

She went to the telephone and dialed Emergency. She told the responding operator the situation and the address. Then she joined Nathan in the kitchen, where he was sitting with his hands folded on the table like a boy in a schoolroom. She did not sit down. She stood in the doorway, watching him.

"Is it true, what Stan said?"

"I told you, Rosa. I draw a blank on that time. How would I know?"

The paramedics arrived. Two police officers came in as well. The injured man was probably going to be okay, but there would have to be tests. Stan was placed on a gurney and wheeled out to the street.

One of the officers took notes as Rosa explained what had happened. She exonerated Nathan. Stan was in the process of beating her up; she showed fresh bruises. Nathan came to her rescue. As the daughter of the famous financier Tregale, her words carried

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plenty of weight. Still, Nathan Cullen was advised not to leave town.

With the two of them facing each other in the silent house, Rosa went to bed. She told Nathan she could handle nothing more that night. They would talk in the morning.

"Dream of your singing career," he told her as she left the room.

The living room was in disarray. Nathan moved from here to there, restoring things. The poker was the last object he picked up. There was blood on it. He ran his finger through the sticky substance and brought it to his mouth. The taste was familiar, and it was overpowering. His heart began to pound like an engine. "What's happening to me?" Nathan wondered. "Or has it already happened?" A dark curtain was rising in his mind; past events stood plainly visible.

His notebook was back in the studio. He went there, sat at the desk, turned the pages, and picked up his pen. He began to write.

A vine has sprung up and it clings to the sides of the gravestone,
With flowers extracting their life from where Nathan lies dead.
The groundskeeper says he has never seen anything like it—
They bloom in the night, and the petals produced are blood-red.

Nathan capped his pen and set it down on the cover of the closed notebook. The narrative poem was finished. He got up and went into the living room where he picked up the telephone, dialed, and asked for the police. To the officer who responded, he explained who and where he was and some of what had happened years ago. Then he concluded, the lines flowing smoothly from his supercharged mind:

"My life is a crime. There's no reason for me to be living.
I haven't the right to exist as a neighbor of men.
You'd better send somebody back here to take me to prison.
I murdered before, and I don't want to do it again."

When he put down the telephone, a familiar feeling took him over. He had not felt this way for years. Never mind the righteous call to the police. He was an animal and he had to escape this trap. Quickly, he went to his room and took up his empty duffel bag. He carried it, along with his notebook and pen, to the trophy cabinet in the study. He selected four of the best pieces of silver and stowed them in the bag. If he hurried, he could be in and out of one of the all-night pawn shops before Rosa noticed the theft and alerted the police. He was going to need money and this would set him up for a while.

Good old Biriac, he thought, as he let himself out the door very quietly. In his joking way, Stan had shown him how he could survive a little longer. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

The Rude Awakening of Sybil Flitch

by David Williams

"*Mademoiselle,* I think you have dropped your sunglasses."

The voice came from behind Sybil Flitch as she was mounting the solid flight of concrete steps that led from the beach to the Promenade des Anglais. The accent had been French, the tone cheerful but concerned. When she turned, the speaker was revealed as a man of around forty—which was her own age. Wearing a white T-shirt, blue shorts, and sandals, her benefactor was a fraction shorter than she was, lithe and bronzed, with neat black hair, active blue eyes, and a firm, good-humoured mouth. In Sybil's own immediate, self-belittling opinion, he was a lot more confident than she was, but then, most people were. Nor was she surprised that the man had assumed she was English, because most of the other people in Nice assumed that, too, despite the copy of *Paris Match* pointedly left protruding from

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her canvas shoulder bag.

"Oh . . . *merci, monsieur, merci beaucoup. . . . Je suis très, très* . . . grateful." She took a loud breath. "I mean . . . *reconnaissante.*"

"They're prescription lenses, perhaps?" He smiled approvingly at the timid woman and the earnestness of her halting expressions as he handed her the glasses.

"Yes, they are. It was . . . it was careless of me to drop them." She put the glasses on so that she could stop squinting at him against the sun.

"It's easily done. But you are English, yes, *mademoiselle?* With an excellent French accent and vocabulary."

David Williams is a Welshman, born in Bridgend. He was educated at Oxford, where he took a degree in modern history, interrupted by three years service as a Royal Navy officer. Head of the large London advertising agency that he had founded, at age 50 he was advised to leave commerce following a serious illness. Two years after his recovery, he was established as a full-time writer. He has since written 22 novels, the most recent of which is *Suicide Intended* (HarperCollins '99). ¶

"I'm studying French. In my spare time. A correspondence course." Sybil felt herself blushing after blurting out the unnecessary details. She moved involuntarily from one foot to the other, then back again—a maladroit, nervous habit that had beset her since childhood, and which inevitably manifested itself when anyone paid her a compliment. The shy girl had long since developed into a gauche and overly inhibited woman.

"Then *bonne chance avec vos études, mademoiselle.*" With that, the handsome Frenchman quickly mounted the remaining steps and made off along the wide sidewalk.

Sybil sighed to herself as she checked the bag to be sure it wasn't in danger of shedding any more of her precious belongings. All the same, it seemed odd that the glasses had fallen out. She was quite sure they had been firmly stuffed into the open side pocket. As she looked up again, she caught sight of her reflection in one of the sheltering glass panels of the Neptune private beach, which she had been using every morning, and where she had her lunch. It was no wonder the man hadn't wasted any time getting to know her better. Her mousy hair appeared to be less "tousled cut" than downright unkempt. Her face was blotchy because she hadn't rubbed in the après-sun cream properly. And the barely thigh-length, rust-coloured linen shift she had on made her look like an undernourished Roman slave, a maturing waif, not a carefree, rich, twenty-first-century, unattached Parisienne—which was the way Dilys Morgan had described what the garment did for her when it

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arrived from the mail-order company.

Of course, it was unfair to blame Dilys for anything except for not being here—and that hadn't been her fault, Sybil remonstrated with herself as she waited for the pedestrian crossing light to change. She regularly crossed the wide thoroughfare at this point, opposite the Négresco, one of the most prestigious hotels on the French Riviera, in the hope people would assume she was staying in it. Sybil was prone to harmless, if also pointless, fantasizing. She gave a surreptitious pull at the right-side hem of the shift where it seemed shorter than it did on the left. Altogether it felt too short all round, especially now she had left the beach. At home, in Wimbledon, she wouldn't have been seen dead on the street in a skirt that finished so far above her knees. Walking in a very short skirt made her want to crouch like Groucho Marx. How different it would have been if Dilys had been here as planned, building up her courage.

When the traffic halted, Sybil made the crossing, while trying to ignore the very old man who was moving half a pace behind her, keeping up with difficulty, and with the help of a stick. She imagined that his disgusting, lascivious gaze was boring into the back of her naked knees, or worse. In truth, the fellow was half blind and was stalking her only for protection from the traffic.

The unattached, morally rigorous Sybil worked in the production department of a small, specialist Southwest London publishing company. She had been a late, only child. Her parents were now both dead. Her father, after surviving his wife by eight years, had eventually departed this life three years ago. Sybil's inheritance had included a substantial house and an equally substantial holding in government bonds.

She had decided to stay in the house, having no desire to leave Wimbledon, where she had grown up. She still attended the Episcopal church there, except this currently had less to do with her enduring faith than with her regard for the new curate. It also involved a degree of optimism in view of the rumour that the forty-four-year-old curate was celibate, a possibility that provided material for one of Sybil's wilder fantasies—until she had absently implied as much to Dilys. Her friend had immediately insisted that a bachelor clergyman wasn't the stuff for fantasy but rather a lively challenge, and that Sybil should "go for it." Altogether, Dilys had been good for Sybil's morale, though Sybil rarely acted on her more audacious promptings. She had yet to "go for" the curate, at least by any route that might seriously have alerted him to the fact.

Sybil enjoyed her job and had risen to be the firm's Deputy Production Manager—though, since there were only three people in the department, that wasn't saying a great deal. She was careful to live within her modest salary, using the income from her inheri-

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tance to pay only for treats, such as visits to the theatre or the ballet.

Increasingly she had come to think of those funds as the sacrosanct nest egg that would see her through a comfortable, if still single, old age. For Sybil had abandoned serious ambitions involving romance and marriage. The older she became, the more such hopes were replaced by fantasies often more deliciously wanton than any she would knowingly confide to anyone, including Dilys. She was now striding inland toward the Hotel Pleasance. It was early afternoon still, but unusually dry and hot for April. At least she had been lucky with the weather, and although this was the last full day of her holiday, she was still being careful not to expose herself to too much sun.

The hotel, on a quiet street off the rue de la Buffa, was a small and older establishment, its 1890s exterior now shrouded in purple bougainvillea. It had no restaurant, nor any true view of the sea, but the interior had recently been refurbished, and there was a tiny garden with cushioned chairs, and a stone fountain that played gently in the background. The place had been especially commended in the holiday brochure as a comfortable and modestly priced base, convenient for the beach, as well as for the many cultural attractions that Nice offered. Early season single guests, like Sybil, were given the use of "doubles" at no extra charge. She preferred a double bed for the admitted reason that she found it more comfortable, and the unacknowledged one that it fitted the scenario of several of her holiday fantasies.

Sybil had made few really close friends in her life, partly because of shyness, but as much because she was naturally wary of such relationships. This was why her burgeoning friendship with Dilys Morgan had latterly become so important to her. She found Dilys uniquely sympathetic from the start. The two had met more than a year ago, over coffee and sandwiches before a symphony concert at London's Festival Hall. Dilys also lived alone, in a flat not far from Sybil. A legal secretary in the City, she was two years younger than Sybil, and divorced. The two women had similar cultural tastes and lifestyles, though Dilys's bachelor existence was of her own making. She was an exuberant personality, outgoing, gregarious, and pretty with it.

Although attractive to men, a bad marriage had soured future relationships in that context, at least for the time being, but she took a vicarious interest in helping to improve what she called Sybil's "prospects," which, she insisted, didn't necessarily need to involve specifically marriage prospects. Sybil had found that insistence not only challenging, but also releasing—and definitely not off-putting, at least not in the way Dilys put it.

The holiday the two women had planned together had been

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something that Sybil had looked forward to with immense enthusiasm—until the sudden serious illness of Dilys's widowed mother in West Wales had made it incumbent on Dilys, also an only child, to go to her side and to stay there. This had happened only a few days before the two friends had been due to leave. In the circumstances, travel insurance had covered the cost of Dilys's cancellation, but not Sybil's. It had been Dilys who had persuaded her friend that it would be profligate to waste the cost of the trip. But now, nearly two weeks later, the holiday without Dilys had proved deeply disappointing.

Sybil and her father had regularly taken their annual vacation together in the English Lake District—always at the same hotel, and always during the first two weeks in July. In the year following her father's death, Sybil, more obliged than actually anxious to strike out on her own, had joined a conducted art tour of Rome.

All the other participants had proved to be either elderly married couples, or even more elderly widows whose conversation had centred around bodily ailments or on new ways of enquiring why Sybil hadn't married yet. There had been no widowers in the party, eligible or otherwise.

In the second year, Sybil had returned to the Lake District.

The idea of joining a singles or under-forties holiday club at some exotic location had been anathema to Sybil—and not only because she imagined she would be older than everyone else. One of the early bonding ties with Dilys had been that the other woman also abhorred such arrangements, though not for the same reasons as Sybil. As Dilys had put it bluntly, she objected to parading herself as an unwanted female who was "bursting for it." There were much more subtle and civilised ways of enjoying yourself in company of your own choosing, she had insisted. The holiday in Nice had been intended to prove the point.

"Good afternoon, Mees Fleech," beamed Maurice from behind the hall desk. "You 'ave a good morning, yes? And nice lunch on the beach again? So, this afternoon you visit another museum?" He reached behind him for Sybil's room key. Maurice was a fey, engaging, even ethereal-looking youth, slim, with close-cropped hair, gold earrings, and delicate hands. Officially, he was the live-in hotel concierge, but on most days, from dawn to seven in the morning, and nine in the evening until midnight (when the front door was locked), he was also receptionist, telephonist, barman, and room-service waiter. Until Easter, which was much later in the month, the hotel was understaffed to balance with its being under-patronized.

Maurice had been taking a caring interest in Sybil. "You go to the Chagall Museum again, perhaps? Or the Matisse? You enjoyed the Chagall very much, yes?" he questioned again, while still holding on to the key.

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"I'd like to go back there, but my museum pass expired yesterday. How much is a day ticket at the Chagall?"

"Voilà! Mees Fleech. I 'ave this for you." With a graceful, balletic movement of one arm, Maurice handed her a card, along with her key. "Some guests who left this morning gave it to me. It's a weekly museum pass for two, expiring tomorrow. They got it from their travel agents. You're welcome to it. No charge." He beamed.

It was two hours later when Sybil moved through the entrance of the Chagall Museum on Nice's Hill of Cimiez. She had washed her hair and spent a little time reading in the hotel garden before walking most of the way to her destination on the shady side of the streets. She was now wearing a cotton-and-polyester dress which she considered a lot more decorous than the shift, and which was actually more flattering to her figure, as well as less of a strain on her nervous system.

"So, we meet again, *mademoiselle.* Do you think it can be fate?" It was the Frenchman from the beach. Sybil's knees weakened under her—but the feeling was intensely agreeable.

"You're a Chagall addict, too?" she uttered, trying to behave with the nonchalance of a Dilys Morgan. He was such a beautiful man, with a quite radiant smile, and a voice even deeper and more captivating than she remembered.

"I've no idea if I'm that, but I'm here to find out," he answered her question, then posed one of his own. "Perhaps you can teach me about him, *Mademoiselle . . . Mademoiselle . . .* er?"

"Flitch. My name's Sybil Flitch. And I'd be glad to go round the galleries with you." Although she had already twice rocked from one foot to the other, she was suddenly full of courage, doing what Dilys would have done—steeling herself to capture just one sweet human experience from this miserable, totally unremarkable holiday. And she did know a lot about the artist. She had borrowed several books on him from the Wimbledon Public Library before she came, and this was her third visit to the museum.

"And I am Anton Remand. You must call me Anton." They shook hands, and she was conscious that he had held hers a touch longer than was necessary. "You must let me buy the tickets," he insisted as they approached the counter.

"Please, no. I've got them. Well, a double ticket, for the week." Why did she feel as though she were inviting him to share her double bed?

"Oh, but you have someone else coming? I'm intruding." He stopped and drew back a little.

"No, no." She took a breath. "He . . . he had to leave Nice this morning." Now she was telling lies, and was not in the least ashamed of it. And so began the most exciting, romantic experience

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in Sybil's life. They toured the museum, with Anton as a willing, intelligent pupil, something that increased Sybil's confidence by the moment. Afterwards they took a bus down to the Old Town, had several drinks at a café in the Place Rosetti before dining, slowly and with increasing intimacy, at L'Escalinada, a pretty restaurant perched up two steps in the narrow rue Pairoliere. The food and wine, both chosen by Sybil's gourmet French escort, were superb, particularly the wine, which Sybil consumed in uncustomarily large quantities. At the end, she had insisted on paying her share of the bill, which her companion had at first refused to let her do. Finally, though, he capitulated only, he said with a tolerant smile, to make her happy. Certainly, by this time, she was very happy indeed.

Anton had gathered a good deal of information about the increasingly loquacious Sybil, though, fortunately for her, he had asked nothing about her companion whom she said had left that day. She had learnt, in turn, that Anton lived in Lyons, was a long-distance truck driver (and a commendably cultured one), who owned his own rig and operated on routes all over Europe, including Britain. On medical advice, he was taking a few days off from work after treatment to dispel a stomach ulcer. He was staying with married friends in Nice. When he casually let slip that he was a childless widower, Sybil had been ready to burst into a spirited rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus. Instead she drained her glass again, and didn't demur when her escort refilled it—nor when his leg engaged hers even more closely beneath the table.

Later, delicious tremors had run through Sybil's body when the two had strolled, hand in hand, along the moonlit and almost deserted promenade. When Anton stopped and took her in his arms and kissed her, first gently, then ravenously, she matched his ardour with an alcoholically strengthened passion that she hoped was promising nothing less than headlong, amorous surrender.

It was nearly a quarter to midnight when they finally reached her hotel.

"You'll come in for a drink, won't you?" she pleaded rather than asked, and with high hopes and no concerns about the possible delicious consequences of the suggestion.

Anton gave her a conspiratorial smile. "I'd like that very much, my darling."

The normally ubiquitous Maurice was not behind the hall desk, nor could he be seen at the little bar in the lounge. The ground floor of the hotel appeared to be empty.

"The bard . . . the barden . . . the garden is beautiful," Sybil offered solemnly, but without attempting to move her guest in the garden's direction, and before adding, "One can almost see the ocean from the balcony of my room." She ran both hands through her hair, vaguely simulating what the almost sea breeze on the

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balcony might do to it. "I've got a small bottle of Scotch there, too. For emergencies."

"Then I'd definitely like to sample the view and the bottle," Anton responded.

"Right," said Sybil rather loudly, then put an upright, silencing finger to her lips before confiding: "It's a double room."

"Indeed?" His eyebrows lifted a fraction. After the defining statement about the nature of her accommodations, Sybil, somewhat unsteadily, went behind the desk and helped herself to her room key. "Now, where's the lift gone?" she asked, stooping a little and turning in a half circle, then back again. "Ah, there it is," she giggled, pointing. "Come on, then." She attempted to move boldly across the hall, tripped, and was caught by her attentive escort. She then straightened her dress—before managing to repeat the performance.

Sybil was never able to recall in absolute detail what happened during the ensuing quarter of an hour. Sufficient that, no matter how rapturous the experience, at a moment when, as she'd often been led to expect, that rapture should have ratcheted up a notch (ahead of it racheting up several more), she had been unceremoniously jerked out of paradise and into a sobering, devastatingly earthy reality.

Without warning, as they lay hotly entwined on the bed, Anton had been consumed by a fit of violent and agonising physical distress. Moaning and gasping for breath, he separated from her, clutching at his chest, his expression transfigured by the pain he was enduring. Then his back arched and twisted in a hideous way before his whole body froze, and with an awful, sepulchral groan, he totally collapsed, limp and inert, face buried downwards on the bedsheets.

At the exact moment of Anton's final prostration, the petrified and nearly naked Sybil was conscious of a church clock starting to toll the hour, and then of an incongruous, urgent knocking at her door. Grateful for the promise of some other human involvement in her plight, and oblivious of what impression an outsider would make of her appearance and, more, of her compromising situation, she scrambled to open the door, grabbing her nightdress as she went.

"Mees Fleech, I saw your key was gone. You're okay, eh? I 'ope."

She pulled Maurice inside, closed the door, and propelled him toward the lifeless figure on the bed. "My . . . my friend, he's ill. It's some kind of seizure. Please fetch a doctor."

"Oh, *Mon Dieu.*" Maurice quickly felt for a pulse at Anton's wrist, then at his neck. Next, in an unexpectedly professional manner, he raised the still facedown body slightly, thrusting his

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ear against the chest. A moment later he shook his head. "I regret, Mees Fleech, your friend is dead." He caught her as she appeared to be about to collapse and helped her into a chair.

"He can't be dead," she murmured insistently. "A minute ago we were . . ."

"Mees Fleech, until last summer I was a medical student—failed, I regret, but I know 'ow to take a pulse. Also I know when a man is dead. This one is. He 'ad been ill?"

Sybil nodded and began to weep. "He was recovering from something. I think he said a stomach ulcer."

Maurice pouted incredulously. "More likely, I think, a 'eart attack, like now, only this one was massive."

"But shouldn't we still get a doctor in case . . . ?"

"It would be no 'elp for your friend, who is very dead," the young man interrupted. "Only very dangerous for you, Mees Fleech." He paused. "These are 'is clothes?" He picked up the shirt, then the blue slacks Anton had been wearing, and searched the pockets. From the trousers he withdrew a small hinged plastic pill case. Inside were four small tablets. He put one of the tablets to his tongue. "So, it's as I thought. These are for angina attacks. Your friend should not have been exerting 'imself too 'ard." The look he gave Sybil was not admonishing, only sympathetic.

Sybil gave an agonised gasp. "So what should I do?"

"You should do nothing, except go to the bathroom and close the door. Better to leave everything to me than to . . . to make your agony greater."

"But he's my responsibility. Oh God." She covered her face with her hands while her shoulders began to heave in concert with her sobbing.

Maurice knelt beside her chair. "Listen, Mees Fleech. If a dead man is found in your bed there will be a big enquiry. You will be interviewed by the police, er . . . detained in France, while the authorities discover exactly 'ow he died. Also what he was doing in your room. If you invited 'im in." The speaker clenched his teeth as part of a painful grimace. "The newspapers will report all this. It will be embarrassing for you, or worse. You could be arrested, who knows what will be decided in such a matter?"

She uncovered her tear-stained face. "Oh no. I can't bear it. It was all so . . . so innocent." Except, even in her still half-bemused, intoxicated condition, Sybil realised that, by her standards at least, the last description was hardly apposite.

"Of course it was innocent, Mees Fleech. But better you don't 'ave to explain that to anyone except me. One other thing, do you know, did he live in Nice?"

"No, in Lyons. He was staying with friends in Nice, near the airport. He wasn't married," she added in an expiating tone.

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"That's good. So please, into the bathroom."

Her expression was now half enquiring, half supplicating. "But what are you going to do?"

"I dress 'im, then move 'im to an empty room down the corridor. Later tonight, I arrange for my cousin to come with 'is car. He'll drive your friend to a quiet place on the beach, near the airport. He will be found there in the morning. A poor fellow who 'ad a 'eart attack when walking 'ome." Maurice shrugged before his face clouded a little. "The two of you were alone this evening?"

"Yes. We met for the first time at the museum this afternoon."

"Good. So no one else was with you, to remember you were together?"

"No one. Oh, except the waiter in the restaurant where we ate."

Maurice thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Okay, that's a small risk."

He helped her out of the chair, then to the bathroom door. "Stay there for five minutes. Then come out and go to bed. You 'ave sleeping tablets with you?"

"Yes. They're very mild."

"Take one, to 'elp you sleep."

She nodded, and for the first time there was a ray of hope in her eyes. "I don't know how to thank you enough. If there are expenses . . ."

"I regret, such 'appenings cost a little, of course," he interrupted awkwardly. "For myself, you are welcome to my 'elp. For my cousin, who takes a great risk . . . yes, we'll 'ave to pay 'im, but I think it's better than spoiling your reputation, no? Your life?" he completed dramatically.

"Oh yes, Maurice, and of course I'll pay."

It was six-thirty when Maurice knocked gently on the door with Sybil's breakfast tray. She felt she hadn't slept at all, before she remembered waking twice in the night hoping the whole Anton episode had been a bad dream—and grimly realising that it wasn't. She had certainly lain awake contemplating the awful things that could happen to her in a foreign country where she'd been caught in bed with a dead man she hardly knew, and then had someone else dispose of the body. Apart from the possibility of being arrested, even imprisoned, she would never have been able to face Wimbledon again, or the firm. The last two consequences were immediately more dreadful even than the prospect of incarceration; she was so dreadfully ashamed.

Maurice opened the balcony window wider and put the tray on the table outside in the sunlight. It was a ravishing day. He turned to face Sybil. "So everything is fixed, Mees Fleech. There is nothing to worry about. Nobody will ever know your friend was 'ere. It's all over." He gave her a confident grin.

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"You mean your cousin did . . . did everything?" she half whispered, pulling the collar of her negligée tighter around her neck and leaving a good deal less of her bare flesh exposed than on the last occasion Maurice had been present.

He nodded with great assurance. "And no need to whisper, Mees Fleech, the rooms on both sides are empty."

"I see, yes." She wondered if one of those rooms had been used as a temporary resting place for Anton Remand during the night, but didn't ask. Instead she said: "And how much do I pay your cousin?"

"Ah, I regret, more than I expected." He brushed a hand over his stubbly haired head, something she had noticed he did whenever he was embarrassed. "It was all more complicated, you see? My cousin had to, er, how you say, involve someone else. Someone he 'as to pay more than 'imself." The speaker hesitated. "But it's better you don't know the details, mees. And I will pay some of the cost for you."

"Certainly not, Maurice. I owe you everything. Just tell me how much your cousin needs."

Maurice swallowed. "I regret it's . . . it's twenty-five thousand francs. Most of it he will need today . . . to pay 'is collaborator."

Sybil had hoped it might be less, but had been prepared for it to be even more—possibly a great deal more. It had been something else she had worried about during the night. She told herself now that two and a half thousand pounds, the equivalent of the sum Maurice had named in British currency, was nothing compared to the value of the freedom it had bought her. Her nest egg could and would have to stand it. "Your cousin shall have it, Maurice. Only I don't know if I can get that much transferred to Nice today. And you know I'm leaving this afternoon. Could I send part of it to you at . . ."

Maurice was looking relieved. "I know 'ow, Mees Fleech," he broke in. "Last month another guest arranged to 'ave a bigger sum sent 'ere from England quickly. To buy a painting. It took an hour only to arrange. I can show you the bank he used."

Maurice was right. For a hefty management charge, and after several telephone calls from the Nice branch of an American bank to the manager of Sybil's bank in Wimbledon, 30,000 francs were placed at her immediate disposal. She had increased the sum because she wanted to reward Maurice himself. She had explained to her own sensibly cautious bank manager on the telephone that she was using the money to buy an oil painting offered to her at a knockdown price, and that she would be selling bonds to cover the temporary overdraft at the bank immediately on her return.

Sybil gave Maurice the money over coffee at a rear table in an otherwise deserted café near the bank. He was even more reluctant to accept the extra 5000 francs than the late Anton Remand

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had been about allowing her to pay half the bill for dinner—but, like Anton, he had eventually given in, with profuse thanks.

Maurice had the rest of the day off. He said he would like to have been with Sybil until she left, to keep her spirits up, but that it would be unwise for them to be seen together. Thus, they had said their farewells at the café, when he had suddenly taken her hand and kissed it profusely, while repeating his thanks for the money. She had found his action quite touching, and, in a way, curious in view of the risk and effort he'd taken for such a relatively small and unasked-for personal reward.

At Maurice's earnest request, Sybil agreed to go to the beach in the usual way, and to have lunch there, except, on the way back to the hotel from the bank she felt impelled to enter a church, the one whose clock had chimed the fatal hour the night before. The interior smelled of incense, a familiar enough scent to her since the Wimbledon church was "high," though less gilded than this one. She knelt at the back and silently confessed her shame and penitence for what had happened. From now on, she promised to cleave to her normal moral standards, and to avoid heavy drinking. She thanked God for sending Maurice to help her. Then she thanked God again for sending Anton, whom she believed (this after some intricate mental gymnastics) a caring divinity had intended should be the love of her life, her future husband, and the father of her children. While Anton had been denied fulfilling this destiny, through untimely illness, and with their love unconsummated (just), his memory would remain in the forefront of her being, a real and enduring presence that would (very possibly) transcend any future need for other men in her life.

After all that, Sybil felt a good deal better—especially about Anton's role. Her well-being improved even more after she happened to see the local news on television in her room. There had been no mention of Anton. Maurice had already told her that the death was unlikely to warrant more than cursory investigation by the authorities, fatal heart attacks being common in holiday resorts, where many people came to recuperate. In any case, he insisted, there was nothing now that could possibly connect Sybil with the tragedy.

With everything packed except the shift she was wearing and her travelling clothes, Sybil had walked to the beach, returning to the hotel again after lunch. The tour company's airport coach was due to pick her up there at two-fifteen. It happened, though, that she had left herself too little time to shower and change, and because the coach had arrived early she had ended up boarding it in some haste and confusion. It wasn't until they had been moving for more than a minute that she missed her wrist watch, and figured she must have left it in the bathroom. It had been her

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mother's watch, quite valuable, and sentimentally irreplaceable.

"Stop the bus! Stop the bus! *Arretez, s'il vous plait, monsieur!*" she cried, rising from her seat, grasping her case from the rack, and struggling forward along the aisle. "*J'ai laissé ma montre dans l'hôtel.*"

The driver, a reasonable man, stopped the vehicle quickly enough. Even so, he explained to the mademoiselle that he had other pickup points to reach. His schedule didn't allow for passengers to return to hotels to retrieve abandoned watches. If she got off now, she would have to hire a taxi if she still wanted to catch her plane. Sybil said she understood, left the coach, and hurried back to the Pleasance.

Again the reception desk at the hotel was deserted. Instead of waiting for the lift, she dropped her case in the hall and ran up the stairs. The door to her room was open. The regular maid was changing the bed linen. Sybil explained about the watch, but failed to find it in the bathroom. The girl hadn't seen it, either. She suggested that Maurice at the desk might have it. Sybil, her frenzy mounting, explained that Maurice wasn't at the desk, and that it was his afternoon off. The maid countered that he was probably in his room in the basement, the third on the left from the bottom of the stairs. Although it was wildly improbable that Maurice would have the watch, Sybil reasoned that at least he could be relied on to look for it, and post it to her if it was found. She raced back down the stairs to the basement.

Frantic with haste, concerned about the chances of finding a taxi, and in any case doubting that Maurice would be spending his time off in a basement room, instead of knocking politely on his door, Sybil called, "Maurice, are you there?" and turned the knob. The door opened wide to her touch.

It was a small whitewashed room with a single high window letting onto an area wall. There was a bed, a dilapidated wardrobe, and a chest of drawers with a small television set on it. The walls were decorated with magazine posters chiefly of bronzed male couples, clad mostly in bikini briefs and photographed in affectionate poses. But it wasn't the couples in the posters that were riveting Sybil's horrified gaze, it was the couple on the narrow bed. They too had been engaged in an affectionate pose when she appeared, but were now grabbing at the sheet to cover their understandable embarrassment.

Nor was it what the two were doing that had shocked the prudish Sybil, it was who they were—Maurice, whom she had expected to see, and Anton Remand, whom she never expected anyone would see alive again.

"Mees Fleech, I can explain," Maurice began, distractedly pulling on some shorts under the sheet before sliding off the bed.

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"No, he can't, Sybil," Anton offered woodenly, sitting up and steadily fixing his eyes on hers. "I'm sorry. Only, you see, we watched you leave some time ago." He shrugged his bare shoulders before adding, "I'm afraid it's what you call in England 'a fair cop.' We are both underpaid minions in the hotel trade forced to take advantage of unsuspecting guests."

Fighting back tears at first of humiliation, then of rage, Sybil Flitch kicked the door shut behind her. The whole confidence trick was suddenly exposed to her, like its two perpetrators, right down to the fake seduction, aborted, she realised, through the cueing of Maurice in the corridor by the tolling of the church clock—and, no doubt, to the relief of her gay seducer. The last conclusion hurt her a lot.

She breathed in deeply and slowly. "I want my money back now. All of it," she said in a cool, commanding voice, both feet surprisingly well anchored to the threadbare carpet. "Otherwise I call the hotel owner and the police. I'll tell them everything."

"Everything, Sybil?" Anton questioned quietly. "But there's no proof of anything. Not even that we were together."

"There was the waiter at the restaurant . . . and the one at the café. I'll tell everyone why I needed the money from England. The police will believe me."

Anton hesitated, his gaze still locked on hers, then he gave a slow nod to Maurice who hurried to open the wardrobe and to pull an envelope from it. "It's all here, Mees Fleech," he offered plaintively.

The other man chuckled. "You see, there's been no time yet to share it out." He levered himself from the bed, stepped boldly to the chair where his clothes were lying, and pulled on a pair of briefs—all with an insouciance calculated to make Sybil cringe. Except the histrionics failed to affect or to impress her.

Sybil took the envelope from Maurice and checked the contents—three still tightly banded packets of 1000-franc notes. When she opened her handbag to put the money away, her mother's wrist watch detached itself from a side fold of the lining.

She gave a little sigh of pleasure, then stepped across to Anton with a disarming smile. "Anton, or whatever your name is, there was no chance before to say goodbye, was there?" she remarked lightly. Then, without warning, she slapped him so hard across the face that, taking him off balance, it spun him back to the bed. Her powerful, lightning backhand had always been her tennis strong point, as befitted a daughter of Wimbledon.

With that, Sybil left, confident of herself, of finding a taxi, of catching her plane, and, she realised with mounting satisfaction, of having a tale to tell Dilys Morgan that would rock her sideways. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

LONG RUN NORTH

by Raymond Steiber

Jack sat against the stone wall in the moonlight. He was a lot calmer than I would've been. He'd got stitched by the *Federales*—thugs in brown uniforms who passed themselves off as the National Police. Ritchie had been with them. Hands wedged in his jacket pockets with the thumbs outside, an unlit cigarette between his lips, watching it happen with a detached smile on his face—like a tourist observing an argument between foreigners.

We could see them searching the village below, hear their voices in the thick tropical air.

Jack had his hands pressed against his side.

He said: "I'm stopping here, Mike."

And I said: "Are you crazy?"

"I've got to get help for this. Ritchie's my only chance."

"They'll finish you off right here and dump your body in a ditch."

"There are things Ritchie doesn't know. I'll make him think I know them and he'll have to help me. I'll hold them off with my pistol and force Ritchie to talk to me."

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"You'll pass out, Jack. You're barely holding on."

"That's the chance. You'll have to hide out for a while, Mike. You'll need money and a place to hole up and I got them." He gave me the name of a bank. "Safety-deposit box. Everything'll be there. Take my wallet."

"What do I want with your wallet?"

"I got ID in there. You'll need to practice my signature. For the bank."

The flashlights were starting to move in our direction now.

I said: "Let me get you up in the forest."

"No. I'm dead up there. This way I've got half a chance. Get out now. I'm starting to hurt. I don't want to talk anymore."

He took one hand from his side and fumbled his wallet out into the dirt.

The *Federales* were getting closer. I did a knee bend and picked up the wallet. I didn't want to leave him, but I didn't want to stay, either.

Jack got his pistol braced. He stopped looking at me and started looking down the road toward the weaving flashlights.

I hesitated a moment longer, then got out of there.

I made it around the next bend and up into the forest. I didn't hear any gunshots behind me, but all that might mean was that Jack was dead.

The second day out I ran into some Guatemalans. They were headed for *El Norte* and I told them I wanted to go to *El Norte,* too.

I was a little feverish from drinking water out of a creek I thought was clean but apparently wasn't. That night one of them thought he'd stick a knife in me and take my wallet, but I showed him the Glock automatic I had and he changed his mind. Maybe it was the way the barrel gleamed in the light of the campfire.

We got into Mexico by the simple expedient of crossing a creek two dozen yards down from the border post. There were bandits waiting in the dark to relieve the Guatemalans of what few valuables they had. They probably worked in league with the border

From Mexico through the United States heartland to Canada and, finally, Alaska, Raymond Steiber takes us on a chase in which two separate and devious plots finally dovetail in a heartstopping finish. This type of large-scale adventure tale deserves the title mystery because of its strong crime content and clever twists and turns. Mr. Steiber also writes private-eye stories and espionage tales for *EQMM.* †

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guards and shared their meager takings with them. I showed them the Glock, too, and got the same reaction I'd gotten from the would-be thief, and now the Guatemalans, the few who'd come with me, became my bosom buddies.

We caught freights and ramshackle buses and falling-apart trucks north. The little money I had greased the process and the Glock kept the drivers from getting too ambitious.

Rattling along the bad roads, I thought about Jack sometimes, and the futile mission we'd undertaken. I was ex-Drug Enforcement Agency; Jack was still on the job. Put that another way: I was a *fired* government employee. It's bad enough getting fired from any job, but getting fired from the government is a little like being dropped down a well and then having somebody put the cover back on. And particularly when the occasion for the firing is a charge of corruption.

I'd been getting too close to Ritchie, who was my boss, with my investigations, and he'd set me up and then sunk the knife in my back up to the hilt. Jack had come to me. He said: We can still get this guy. He said: There's a man down in San Felipe province. He's got paper, photographs, I don't know what it is, linking Ritchie to the kingpins who run the drugs out of there. I'm going down on my own and get it before he decides to sell to Ritchie instead, and I need backup.

I'd thought: I can get my life back. We'd gone down there and Jack had set up the meeting. We drove to the village. Jack went inside while I watched his back. He found Jiminez with a bullet in the back of his head, and then Ritchie and the *Federales* had shown up. And now, by the time Ritchie got done with it, there'd probably be a warrant out for me and I'd have to run for the rest of my life. Unless Jack hadn't died back there. Unless he'd used that clever brain of his to figure something out.

Two nights later we walked into Arizona with about as much difficulty as you'd stroll down to the corner for a pack of cigarettes. Some rancher had an irrigated field on the other side and it was all trampled down by the many who'd gone before us. There was garbage strewn all over the place, too. It made you wonder what sort of feckless government we had. But thinking about Ritchie, I already knew what sort.

So now I was back. And I was back in a way that Ritchie couldn't find out about by tapping into a computer.

I separated from the Guatemalans, and I bought some new clothes and cleaned up in a gas-station restroom. Nobody looked at me the way they would've looked at the Guatemalans. I was an Anglo. Well, a Polish-American "Anglo"—put it that way. I fit in here.

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I didn't have much money left. I caught a long-distance bus and sat in the back practicing Jack's signature on the margins of discarded newspapers. It took a long time to get where I was going, and at the end of it I was pretty good.

The bank was in Kansas City, where Jack had once worked in the regional DEA office. It was a smart choice. Middle of the country and Jack could get there from any direction without looking like he was going anywhere. The question was why he'd taken the safety-deposit box in the first place. I'd had a lot of time to think that over, and all I could come up with was the latent paranoia that came with working for somebody like Miles Ritchie.

The bank was located in a suburban shopping center on the Kansas side of the river. In my father's day, tellers had worked for their banks till they dropped of old age, but now there was such a big turnover that I didn't have to worry about not being recognized as Jack.

A pretty little blonde—well, blond from the roots up—left me alone with the safety-deposit box. It contained two thousand dollars in cash, a map, a pistol, and some phony ID. The ID threw me. I couldn't figure it out. But maybe it was just Jack planning ahead for any curves that Ritchie might throw us. He was smarter than me, that had always been the thing with him, and in the end that was why I'd gone along with him on the Jiminez deal.

I unfolded the map. It was a strip that had been cut from a larger map and traced the route from a town called Fort Nelson to a location in the vicinity of a large lake to the west. The place Jack had told me about as he'd sat against the wall—his hideout. Jack was big on hunting and fishing, so it would be a cabin of some sort. But where the hell was Fort Nelson?

I took the money and the map, left the pistol and the ID. There was a Barnes & Noble in the mall. I went in and got an atlas off the shelf and sat in a chair. It took me nearly twenty minutes to find Fort Nelson. It was in northern British Columbia, about four-fifths of the way up the Alaska Highway to the Yukon.

I thought: Holy shit, Jack. Couldn't you have picked San Diego for a hideaway?

I needed wheels. I wanted to go back to Maryland and collect my own, but that was clearly out. They'd shot us up down in San Felipe like we were nothing, so that said how far Ritchie would go. He'd go all the way. And with the position he held, it was like dollar bills: He had the full faith and credit of the U.S. Government behind him.

I rode an Amtrak back to Arizona because there was a man there who might be able to help me. It was a hundred and five degrees when I hit the streets. The heat sort of socked you and

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then sucked you dry. I caught a local bus and when I got off had to walk another mile in the sun. Larry had a paint and body shop behind a junkyard, and the light and the heat glinted off the broken vehicles there. He did a brisk business in stolen cars, moving them pre-sold to clients south of the border, and we'd planted listening devices in some of the ones that were slated for drug lords. The vehicles themselves had been confiscated from drug dealers in Florida, and we'd just used Larry as a conduit.

Larry's office was air-conditioned. You could say that much for it. Otherwise, it was a dump, an evil-smelling pit. Larry sat behind a much-traveled metal desk. He was a little guy with close-cropped hair like a cop from a 1950s television show. He looked like the type of guy who'd put sawdust in the cylinder heads of a car he was selling you in order to mute the awful noise they made.

I said: "Let me tell you what I want. I want a five- or six-year-old Jeep Wrangler. Good mechanical condition, the rest I don't care about. I want it legal, too, not hot off a street corner. And, oh yeah, I can only give you five hundred for it."

Larry smirked at me. "What've *you* been smoking?"

"Not a thing. But on the way in I spotted a late-model Lexus getting a turquoise paint job and a change of license plates and I was wondering what the cops would think about that."

Larry eyed me a moment, then said: "Come back in the morning."

The Jeep he picked up for me was thirteen years old, but it had a rebuilt engine that showed only 40,000 miles on the odometer.

I opened the hood to take a look at it, and Larry leaned over my shoulder.

"I had a phone call about you," he said.

I came slowly out of the engine compartment.

"What'd you say?"

"I said you'd been and gone. So I guess you better be gone."

I thought: Ritchie taking a shot in the dark. And now he had a place to start looking for me.

"When did you get this call?"

"Yesterday evening."

Time enough for them to get here, then. I needed to move.

I got out of Phoenix pronto, driving north through the midmorning heat—the Jeep had no air conditioner. I picked up I-15 near Las Vegas and as evening fell entered the linear clutter of Provo and Salt Lake City and Ogden. I caught five hours' sleep in a rest area. Then a state patrolman shined a flashlight in my eyes and I splashed water in my face in the restroom and drove on. Idaho Falls; Butte, Montana; Helena; Great Falls; and finally the Canadian border. Just before I reached it, I ditched the Glock in a pond with a salt-crusted shoreline. Canada had strict gun-control laws,

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and I didn't need the trouble it would bring if it were found in the Jeep.

Two days later I reached Fort Nelson. Like Fort St. James and Fort St. John to the south, it had started life as a Northwest Mounted Police post on the trail to Whitehorse in the Yukon. Just outside of town there was a natural-gas processing plant and there appeared to be a lumber mill as well, so it was a place with a little industry. I stopped long enough to pick up a couple of bags of groceries, then headed west toward Muncho Lake Provincial Park.

I'd been driving through country that was flat, with trees marching away for miles on either side of the road. Not old-growth trees. This area had been lumbered over pretty hard. Now I saw mountains looming up ahead. I was coming to the Muncho Lake area, but before I reached it there was a dirt road I had to turn off on—if I could find it.

The dirt road took me southwest through the mountains, then north again over steep hills. I saw black bears and high-stepping moose, but no other vehicles. In among the trees there were patches of old snow, gray and crumbly looking. I'd been on the road a long time, and now it began to get dark. There was a side track I had to take, but I saw nothing like it in the headlights, not even a deer trail.

I came to the top of a rise and spotted something that might have been a snowfield or a body of water. Anyway, it was off to the right and shined palely in the starlight. As soon as I started down, I lost sight of it, but at the bottom of the hill was the track I was looking for—though I almost missed it.

It was rough and partially overgrown and seemed to be taking me in the direction of the lake I'd seen.

The headlights picked out the shed first, then the cabin, then the little dock jutting out into the water. No lights showed anywhere.

I stopped the Jeep and climbed out. It was after nine o'clock and a little chill and I was in my shirt sleeves. I reached back into the front seat and grabbed the jacket I'd bought at an Eaton's in Calgary. Well, I'm here, I thought as I put it on. Wherever the hell that is.

The cabin faced the lake. I went up on the porch with a flashlight in my hand. The front door had a hasp on it with a padlock.

I thought: If this place is Jack's, he'll have a key hidden someplace. Jack was hell on losing keys and always had a spare somewhere.

It took awhile, but I finally found it. There was a woodpile near

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where the forest began, and one of the logs, when you pulled it out, had a plastic box nailed to the end of it.

I undid the padlock. The cabin had electric lights—that must mean there was a generator out in the shed because I hadn't seen any power lines. It also had candles stuck in the mouths of a couple of empty beer bottles. I lit a few just to get things started, then took a look around.

The cabin was one floor with a sleeping loft above. It had a tiny kitchen with a kerosene-operated refrigerator, and, off that, an indoor bathroom. When I turned the taps on in the bathroom no water came out. That suggested a well with an electric pump that worked off the generator.

I found a spare set of keys in a drawer in the kitchen and went out and unlocked the shed and, after a little effort, got the generator going. That gave me light and water. Then I started a fire in the woodstove, and that gave me a little heat and a place to cook. I brought the grocery bags in from the Jeep and got a can of spaghetti going in a saucepan. While I ate, I thought about the cabin and it occurred to me that I was just assuming it was Jack's. It could very well be someone else's and I could be an intruder.

I checked a closet in the back, and inside were a couple of cardboard boxes. They were filled with books, *old* books, not a one of them dated later than the 1930s. *Murder Gone Mad* by Philip MacDonald. *The Five Flamboys* by Francis Beeding. *The Tragedy of X* by Barnaby Ross. Mysteries, every one of them, probably bought in a bunch at a rummage sale somewhere.

Books didn't sound like Jack. He never read anything he didn't have to, not even memos and reports if he could get away with it. Whenever you had to fly somewhere with him, he'd drive you nuts, paging restlessly through magazines and running off at the mouth while you tried to read or finish some paperwork.

I started to shove the boxes back in the closet, and that was when I spotted the panel in the rear wall. It was held in place by four woodscrews. Now there was something that did look like Jack. I swung the screwdriver tool out of my pocketknife and undid them. The space behind held a Ruger automatic wrapped in an oily rag and two taped-up plastic bags.

The larger of the two bags held a box of shells for the Ruger. The smaller one had a Canadian passport inside and a passbook for an account at a Fort Nelson bank. The account held around 7,800 Canadian dollars, about $5000 American. I opened the passport. It bore Jack's picture and Jack's handwriting but not Jack's name. Not unless he'd recently changed it to Martin Harvey Smith.

I put everything back the way I'd found it and tightened the screws just enough to hold the panel in place. I sat down beside the woodstove and felt in my shirt pocket for a cigarette. Then I

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remembered that I'd given the weed up a year ago. Funny how old habits reassert themselves in new situations. You recall the need, but you don't remember how long it's been since you last satisfied it. Unless it's sex and you've been a prisoner.

Those books—they meant that Jack had planned to stay here awhile and he figured he'd need something to keep him occupied. The illegal Ruger—certainly illegal here in Canada—that meant he was expecting trouble or at least wanted to be ready for it if it came. But why the phony passport? And why the false ID in Kansas City which bore the same name? What was going on here? Was he planning an eventual safe exit for himself? But from what? And *for* what?

I sat there and tried to think it out, but the only place my efforts took me was in a circle.

In the morning a float plane circled the lake. I tried not to let it get me jumpy.

The lake was set in a bowl in the hills. Big woods on either side, mainly conifer and aspen. The aspens were just coming into leaf.

I saw a trout jump and remembered that there was a rod and reel in the cabin. Not that the prospect of fishing excited me much. My situation was too precarious for that. I didn't even know how long I'd have to hole up here. Till Ritchie forgot me? Was that the game?

I needed to get a few supplies, extra batteries, and more gas for the generator. Even so, I wouldn't be able to run it much, not if I didn't want to be constantly making trips into town. Probably only a few hours a night. But as late as it got dark at this latitude, that would be plenty. I'd need plastic jugs, too, so I'd have water when the electric pump wasn't working.

There were a half-dozen empty jerrycans in the shed. I threw them in the back of the Jeep and drove over to Muncho Lake. They had a store there with gas pumps out front, and I was able to buy most of what I needed and not get asked a lot of questions about it. That was because the Alaska Highway ran out front and there was enough through traffic not to make strangers an unusual proposition.

I got back to the cabin late in the afternoon and the float plane was tied up to the dock.

It was painted yellow and black and had a single engine. From the Jeep I couldn't see how many seats it had, but I guessed it would take four.

I climbed out of the Jeep and wished I had the Ruger from the hidey-hole in the closet. But when I saw them I changed my mind about that—although it still didn't explain what they were doing there.

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The two of them were sitting on the porch steps. They weren't surprised to see me because they'd heard the Jeep pull up.

I said: "Just drop by for a visit?"

I didn't say it nice. I said it tight and mean so that it almost came out who the hell are you.

The guy was maybe twenty-five, blond and handsome. He looked a little soft to me, but much later, when I saw him with his shirt off, the muscles were all hard and well defined. It was only around the face that he was soft.

I put the girl at nineteen or twenty. Short brown hair combed down over her forehead. Nice eyes, nose, mouth, but nothing to get you excited. In the clothes she was wearing—lumberjack shirt and baggy jeans—I couldn't get a range on her figure.

The guy said: "We thought the cabin was empty."

I said: "What were you planning to do, break in?"

The guy's face reddened. "No, nothing like that. We just thought we'd put down for a while before going on."

"That your plane?"

"Mine and the bank's. I take fishermen in and out of remote lakes. Sometimes I even fly them up to the Nahanni River."

"Where's that?"

"Northwest Territories. It sounds a long way, but it's just a short hop. You live here?"

"I'm just borrowing the cabin for a while."

"I figured that."

"You did, huh?"

"I met the guy who built this place once. Over at the lodge on Muncho Lake, eating in the restaurant. A bunch of Swiss own it. The food's pretty good."

The girl just looked at me and said nothing.

I rubbed my jaw. "Well, I guess it don't hurt for you to put down here—although you gave me a surprise doing it today. I haven't seen a soul since I arrived and finding you on the front steps was a little shock. I'd offer you a beer or a Coke but I haven't got the refrigerator up yet."

"If you have a net, you can put the cans in that and hang them in the lake. The water's still pretty cold."

"I'll try that."

"Well, we better get going. Hey, look, you wouldn't mind if we stored a barrel of aviation fuel here sometime? Not by the cabin. Across the lake where it wouldn't bother you. This'd make a nice fuel-up spot for us when we head north."

I got suspicious again. "Why don't you just put down at Muncho Lake?"

He shrugged. "You know how it is. People over there ask a lot of questions."

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They hadn't asked me any questions.

I watched them take off down the lake. The girl hadn't said a word the whole time. They hadn't told me their names, either.

A week later I drove over to Muncho Lake again in its mountain canyon. I'd settled down to life in the cabin, even begun reading some of the old mysteries, but I hadn't yet got used to the lonely nights. Just before darkness came down, everything would go so still you thought the whole world was expiring.

I had supper at the lodge the Swiss ran, then drifted into the bar. And that was where I ran into them again. The blond guy who flew the plane and his brunette girlfriend.

I sat down at a table with them. Evening was coming on and I should've been getting back, but I stayed anyway. The girl looked better to me than she had the first time. Maybe I was spending too much time at the cabin.

I got their names—first names, anyway. Janet and Andy.

After about the third drink the girl blurted: "How'd you like to come in with us on something?"

The guy gave her a look. It said: Not so fast.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked lazily.

"Show him, Andy."

Andy had his jacket draped over the back of the chair. He checked out the fishermen at the bar first to see if any of them were watching him, then reached into one of the pockets and took out an old sock. The sock was knotted at one end, and Andy undid it and slid three coins out onto the table.

At first I thought they were American Eagles, but then I saw they were Mexican gold dollars minted back before World War II.

"Where'd these come from?"

Andy said: "China, we think. We read up on it. They used to pay American sailors in Mexican dollars over there. That was back in the twenties when U. S. patrol boats cruised Chinese rivers. So there were probably a lot of them floating around."

"Interesting, but what's it got to do with anything?"

Janet said: "We found the coins on the shore of a little lake up in the Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness. Over on the Alaska side. Where a stream comes down from a glacier."

"Don't tell him so much," Andy muttered.

"Well, so what does he know yet?"

"I don't know anything," I said. "Did you fly in to this lake?"

She shot Andy a defiant look. "Yes. It's all trackless wilderness up there. One of the biggest wilderness areas in the world. No roads for the most part, no shelter, nothing. Andy was looking for a lake he could take fishermen to. One that hadn't been touched and

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was jumping with trout. You find a lake like that and you can do a lot of business."

I said: "Your own private fishing hole."

Andy glanced at me sidewise. "Yeah."

"After we found the coins, we took off again and circled around and that's when we spotted it."

"Spotted what?"

Janet put both hands around her glass of beer and leaned close across the table. "An airplane. An old DC-3. Above the tree line and half buried in the snow."

"And that's where you think the coins came from?"

"We're sure of it. That plane was famous at one time—well, for a few weeks, anyway. They knew it must've crashed, but nobody ever found out where, and the main place they searched was fifty miles north."

"Janet's a computer freak. That's how she knows all this stuff."

"No, I'm not a computer freak. I just live in the present, that's all—not like you. You think you live back in the days of Sergeant Preston and Jack London. Anyway, there's an awful lot of stuff you can do on the Net these days. Like contact libraries and use keywords to search old newspaper files. That plane crashed in nineteen forty-seven, Mike. It was a cargo flight coming in from Hong Kong, but it carried some passengers, too. Merchant seamen returning from China. The plane fueled up in Anchorage, then headed south and just disappeared."

I watched her pretty face. She was the driving force behind this—I could see that. Andy was just along for the ride.

I said: "So you found three coins. That doesn't mean there are any more—which is what I guess you're thinking."

Janet leaned close again. "Those merchant seamen that were on board, they salvaged an abandoned oil tanker from World War Two and sailed it to Hong Kong with a skeleton crew and sold it there. And they got paid in Mexican dollars."

"How do you know what they got paid in?"

"She's guessing," Andy said.

Janet got defiant. "Well, it's a good guess," she said. "And if I'm right, that gold's worth a lot of money now."

I smiled at her. "Gold's always worth a lot of money."

"I mean *more* money. Gold was artificially pegged at thirty-five dollars an ounce back then. It was something the U. S. Treasury did. But in the nineteen seventies they let it float and now it's worth between four and five hundred dollars an ounce. I don't have any idea what an average-size oil tanker went for in nineteen forty-seven, but for the sake of argument, let's say two hundred thousand dollars. Divide by thirty-five to get the number of ounces, then multiply by four hundred, which is about what gold's

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worth at the moment, and you've got over two million dollars in that plane. And not in crinkly paper money that would've rotted by now."

"If true, that's fine. But what do you need me for?"

She got a little flustered trying to explain. "Because—well—we don't want a lot of people knowing about it. We need a safe place to take it—someplace out of sight and where there's a road to haul it out and no prying eyes to see us unload it."

Andy said: "She's afraid somebody might have a legal claim to it—or *think* they had a legal claim—and tie it up in the courts until there's nothing left of it. Then there's the fact that we'd be illegally crossing a border with it."

"Still, why pick me for a partner?"

Janet said: "That lake of yours is perfect for us."

"Also," Andy added, "she thinks you're the type who might know how to handle a deal like this. Just from your looks, you understand."

"That'd be a reason for excluding me."

Janet said: "Look, don't make your mind up now. Come along with us on our next trip and see for yourself. Maybe we'll find more coins. Maybe we'll even get up to the plane itself."

I thought about my lonely cabin and how I was probably going to have to stay there awhile.

I said: "All right, what the hell. It might be interesting. Just don't crash that float plane up there."

Andy said: "That'd make it *real* interesting."

We went up three days later. The float plane had a full load—stuff for a little base camp they intended to establish—and it lifted off the water a little lazily.

We headed north. The coast range was on one side of us, the Yukon plateau off on the other, and the tangle of mountains, lakes, and glaciers that made up the Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness straight ahead.

Clouds were building up on the other side of the coast range. But they were sweeping south down Alaska's inside passage and we wouldn't be bothered by them.

Sooner than I would have expected, we crossed into the Canadian part of Wrangell-St. Elias. There were some big peaks here, among them Mount Logan, which at 19,500 feet was Canada's tallest. Lots of long-tongued glaciers swept down the valleys.

The peak the old DC-3 had slammed into stood on the Canadian side of the line, but the little lake we were headed for was just inside Alaska. Because of the configuration of the valley, Andy had to bring the float plane down in a steep glide. I had a brief glimpse of the remains of the downed DC-3. Janet grabbed my shoulder

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and pointed and I looked and then it was gone. A moment later the floats touched down on the waters of the lake. Andy had to use every inch of the flaps and the backing of the engine, too, to bring us to a stop before we ran out of room.

We unloaded our gear from the plane. As soon as we were finished, Andy took off again, lifting at an acute angle as soon as he was airborne. He was going to fill some cans with aviation gas and bring them back and cache them here at the lake. The sound of his engine racketed off the walls of the valley, then beat against the lonely sky and was gone.

There was a stand of stunted fir trees just up from the lake. We set up a tent at the edge of it, making sure to weight it down with rocks inside and out. I dropped the backpack I'd brought at the entrance to it. Then we stood there gazing across the gravelly beach at the lake.

Janet worked her shoulders. "Spooky, isn't it? With the plane gone, I mean. The nearest place is the old Kennecott mine over near McCarthy, and it'd take us two weeks to get there. Want to see if we can work our way up to the plane?"

"That's what we came for," I said.

We hiked along the beach to the place where the creek came in. Then we began working our way upward. It was rough going, and nobody had been here before us to make the way easier. We'd brought some rope with us, and in places we had to rig lines. With her compact body, Janet was an easy climber, like a kid shinnying up a tree.

After an hour of it we took a break. The lake below had turned into a pond, milky blue from all the glacier silt suspended in it.

Janet said: "How far do you think it is to the nearest person?"

"It's only about two feet for me."

"Besides us, I mean."

"There's probably a shopping center complete with fast-food joint just over the next rise. Or will be sometime in the disgusting future."

"There's a place called Grizzly Lake about seventy miles that way, but you can't get there from where we are—not easily, anyway. You'd have to go all the way around."

Well, parts of you could get there, I thought. In the belly of a wandering eagle.

We pushed on. We'd just about reached the lower end of the snowfield when we heard the float plane returning. Janet semaphored her arms as it swept past, but if Andy saw us he gave no sign of it. He had other things on his mind, like not piling up in the rocks at the far end of the lake.

We moved along the edge of the snowfield. We could see the badly broken-up DC-3 now. It was canted at an impossible angle

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and looked as if at any moment it might plunge the rest of the way down the mountainside. It had probably been buried in the ice and snow much farther up and had only recently been disgorged by a late-winter avalanche.

I shook my head. "It'd be worth your life to try crossing that snowfield. And it'd be worth it again to go poking around inside the plane. That thing's about ready for a final sled ride."

We worked our way back down to the lake by an easier route, but not a less dangerous one. If any part of the snowfield had decided to come loose, it would have swept right over us.

Andy was waiting beside the tent. I told him the bad news.

"Well, I'm not giving up," Janet said stubbornly.

We decided to eat, then climb up again by the easier route and have another look. Maybe the three of us, putting our heads together, could come up with something.

Andy and I wandered down along the shore of the lake, looking for driftwood for a campfire. It was the first time I'd been alone with him. I said: "What's your take on this thing?"

"It could be there. The coins, I mean. I'd sure like them to be there."

"It could all be smoke, too."

He shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

Well, at least this business was taking my mind off Miles Ritchie and the jam that I was in. But I wondered if that was a good thing.

We trekked back up to the snowfield in the afternoon sun. The edges of it were rotten and seeping rivulets of icy water. There would be hollows underneath and weak spots up above. I call it a snowfield, but it was really a snow-and-ice field.

I said: "Come back next spring and this'll all be down in the lake below, the DC-3 included."

"I don't want to come back next spring," Janet snapped. "Somebody else may've spotted it by then."

Andy climbed up on the field, took two steps, then went up to his thighs in a snowhole. With some difficulty he extricated himself and eased back down onto solid ground.

The look on his face wasn't brave.

High above, rocks clattered down into a col, loosened by the direct rays of the late-afternoon sun.

Janet kicked at the snow. "How do we get to that plane?"

I said: "We could use aluminum ladders." And mentally kicked myself for having suggested it. Even ladders wouldn't make it a Sunday stroll.

Janet said: "What do you mean, ladders?"

"Lay them flat on the snow and crawl along them. That way

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your weight's distributed along their entire length and you don't sink in. And if there's a hole or a hidden crevasse the ladder bridges it."

Janet saw daylight. "Yes. That would work. I know it would."

There was an extension ladder in the shed out back of Jack's cabin. If you took it apart, you'd have two ladders that you could use one in front of the other, sort of like a movable railroad track. I told them about it.

"We could tie them along the float struts," Andy said.

"What would that do to the plane?"

"If one of them came partway loose, we'd be in deep trouble. But otherwise it shouldn't do anything."

"You could leave right now and pick it up," Janet said.

Andy shook his head. "It'd be dark before I could get back. I don't want to try landing on this lake after dark. Narrow as this valley is, too many things could go wrong."

"In the morning, then, and by afternoon we can be searching the DC-3."

So that was what we decided on. There was a spare sleeping bag in the float plane so we decided to camp out as well.

After dark I took a stroll along the lake. I saw ghost clouds high up in the northwestern sky, still catching sunlight from beyond the horizon. I'd read somewhere that clouds like that were more than forty miles high and composed of frozen water and methane. In summer, they were common at this latitude, and these shone eerily from within with a bluish light. I wondered what they presaged for the next day.

Janet decided to stay behind while Andy and I flew down for the ladder.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"I'll be all right."

"What if we were to crash or something?"

"Then I'd still be all right. But you wouldn't be."

"Look, there's a Ruger automatic in my pack." It was the one from behind the panel. "If anything makes you nervous, like a wandering bear, for instance, don't hesitate to grab it."

A few minutes later, Andy and I took off. Because of the way Andy had to claw out of the narrow valley, it was a lot more harrowing than the landing had been. I thought of what would happen if our lonely engine cut out. Something swift and certain, that was for sure, and you wouldn't walk away from it.

We made the two-hour journey back to the cabin, touching down around 9 A.M. Everything seemed untouched and quiet, and it was precisely that quiet that should have alerted me.

We took the extension ladder apart and secured the two halves

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to the pontoon struts. Then Andy topped off the tanks from a couple of jerrycans. I decided that it wouldn't hurt if we had some extra flashlight batteries and I headed for the cabin to get them.

They'd left their vehicle out of sight up the track and were waiting for me inside. The Latino with the pistol in his hand should have been the big surprise, but he wasn't. Jack Cole was the big surprise.

He looked pale and wasted and his shirt and jacket hung on him about like they would have hung on an undernourished scarecrow.

The Latino said: "Sit down."

I sat down.

Jack said nothing.

The Latino got out a pair of handcuffs and went around behind me and handcuffed me to the wooden chair. He was thickset, not very tall but big across the shoulders.

He put the pistol against the back of my head.

"Don't do anything," he said.

He withdrew the pistol and left the cabin and went to collect Andy. Or kill him. That was a possibility, too.

I looked at Jack. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Everything'll be all right, Mike."

"Have you changed sides? Is that the story?"

"I'm on my own side. You probably figured that out by now. The cabin and everything—it sort of gives it away."

"You don't look so good, Jack."

"I looked a lot worse before they took the lead out of me and sewed me up again."

"You wanted me where you could find me. That's why you sent me here."

"Yeah, even left a map for you, though that was just in case I couldn't make it myself. It was a gamble all along the line, but it paid off and now Ritchie's going to have to ante up."

"Blackmail—is that your scheme?"

"Just a chance to cash in, that's all. And I took it. What did you do with that wallet I gave you?"

"Wallet?"

"You didn't throw it away, Mike. I know you too well. In all the years I've worked with you, you've never thrown *anything* away."

"When you came out of the house, just before Ritchie and the *Federales* jumped us, you said you didn't get anything. You said Jimenez was already dead."

"He *was* dead—when I left. But that was a play he made for himself—pulled a knife on me—and I didn't have any choice."

"You got the stuff we came for. The stuff that was supposed to nail Ritchie and get me my job back. And you didn't tell me about it. You used me."

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"I needed backup and you had a reason for going in with me."

"And then you hid whatever it was in your wallet."

"A little strip of film tucked behind my driver's license. It shows Ritchie taking money from them—from the Central American drug lords he was supposed to be putting out of business."

"And then you give me the wallet and send me running north with it. Send me to a place where you can lay your hands on me again."

"I was going to come here by myself, where Ritchie couldn't find me, and blackmail him through intermediaries. Then I got shot and had to use the strip of film to force him to take me to a hospital. You had it, and if I didn't come out alive you'd hand it over to the authorities. So here's the game plan. I retrieve the film strip for him and he signs over the contents of a bank account he has in the Bahamas. A fat bank account filled with all the money he's been taking from those corrupt, drug-dealing colonels down there."

"They'll kill you, Jack. That guy out there will kill you. Just as soon as he gets the film."

Jack grinned mirthlessly. "He already shot me once. He claims he's the one who stitched me when the shooting started. Probably just bragging, though—you know what fat egos these guys got. Now where's the wallet, Mike?"

"I threw it away."

"No, you didn't. I know you too well. You're going to tell me where it is and then I'm going to get us both out of this because I'll know and the major won't."

"He's a major, huh?"

"He was in charge of the *Federales* that jumped us."

"Well, I can show you the ravine where I dumped the wallet down there. Or maybe I can't show you. I was doing a lot of dodging around just then."

Jack's jaw tightened up and his face went a shade whiter. "Don't play this game with me, Mike. I need to know where that wallet is before Delgado gets back with your friend."

"It went to dumpster heaven, Jack. Where all the good wallets go."

"Goddam you—"

Then it was too late because Delgado was pushing Andy through the door ahead of him and Andy didn't look too well. He shoved him down on the floor and stood over him with the pistol.

He shot a glance at Jack. "Does he have it? Has he told you?"

Jack just sat there. You could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. He was looking for an angle he could use to play Delgado off against Ritchie and save his skin.

"He won't talk," he said at last.

Delgado didn't waste any time. He just hauled off and slugged

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me in the side of the head. There was a Jesuit priest who hit me like that once, open-handed, when I was cutting up in class. The priest didn't have anything on Delgado. I crashed to the floor and the chair crashed with me.

Delgado dragged me and the chair back upright.

Jack leaned forward and stared into my eyes. "Listen, Mike—*tell him where it is.*"

Meaning tell him *anywhere* and buy us some time.

"I left it in the safety-deposit box. In Kansas City." It just came out. It was all I could think of.

Jack sat back. You could see a little color come back into his face. I'd done right. I'd given him something he could work with.

He turned to Delgado. "We'll have to fly to Kansas City and get it out of the box. Then we call Ritchie from the bank and I give him an account number. The minute the money's transferred I hand you the strip and you walk out."

"What if I just take the film?" Delgado sneered.

"Then I scream bloody murder and a guard stops you and I go back to being an honest DEA agent. You get arrested, and I put the hounds on Ritchie."

Delgado's eyes narrowed. "You better not try that, Jack."

"And you'd better not try walking out."

Delgado swung back to me. "How do I know you aren't lying, huh?"

I just looked at him. A trickle of blood ran down from my torn left ear. He grabbed me by the shirt front.

"*Huh?*"

"Go and look for yourself."

"And let you and your friend here run—I don't think so, *hijo.*"

He let go of my shirt and took a nervous turn around the room.

"We could take him with us," Jack said.

"No—too risky." He stopped and stared at Andy. "And what about this one? Do we take him, too?"

Or do we kill him? That was what he was really saying.

Andy licked a pair of dry lips. "There's a place—up in the wilderness. We've been camping out there."

"What about this place?"

"You could leave him there—take most of his food so he couldn't walk out. Maybe—I don't know—take his boots, too. If he's lying, you could come back and he'd still be there."

"And what do we do with you, *hijo?*"

"You take me along—to Kansas City. I'm just a flyer—I'm not as dangerous as him. And if everything's all right, you let me go and I come back up here and fly him out again. Wouldn't that work? Wouldn't that be okay?"

Delgado didn't like it. He was used to eliminating people, not

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working out problems in logic. It saved a lot of thinking and generally had the same result.

"The kid's got an idea," Jack said.

"You think so? But then you got your own game, don't you?"

"We all got our own game."

Delgado took another turn around the cabin, looking for a solution that didn't have any stamp on it but his own. He didn't have much luck finding one.

He came back around to Andy and tickled his right ear with the barrel of the pistol.

"This better not have any tricks in it, *hijo.*"

We flew north again. Delgado sat up front with Andy; Jack and I were in the back. Delgado had handcuffed my wrists to one of the seat arms and I had to sit sideways with my legs braced. Outside, the ladders made whistling noises as they caught the fast-flowing air.

Jack sagged in his seat. We didn't talk. He looked as if the air had gone out of him. But what had really happened was that he'd realized that he was right back where he'd started all those days ago when he'd got shot. He'd counted on my keeping the wallet and now he couldn't count on anything, not even outwitting the somewhat dense Delgado.

I thought about Janet. Nobody had told Delgado about her yet. How was he going to react when he saw her at the camp?

After a while, I heard Andy talking to Delgado. His voice was pitched loud so he could be understood over the noise of the engine. He dug something out of his pocket and showed it to Delgado. The three Mexican dollars.

I thought: No, Andy.

I knew what he was doing, all right. He was broaching the subject of Janet and trying to use the gold to soften Delgado up. But money made this guy's brain twitch. You didn't know what it would cause him to do.

I glanced over at Jack. His half-closed eyes were regarding me. I leaned as close to him as the handcuffs would allow, and he leaned close in his turn. But his gaze never left the back of Delgado's head.

"Up at the camp—I got your Ruger automatic in my pack. It's the dark blue one, almost brand new. He'll be watching Andy and me. But you might have a chance."

He gave a little nod, then sat back. The skin of his face didn't look so saggy anymore. I'd given him something to think about.

When we got to the lake, Janet was waiting on the gravelly shore. Delgado climbed out on the pontoons with Andy, leaving me and Jack behind in the plane.

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Janet didn't see the pistol in Delgado's hand until he and Andy came ashore. She froze a moment, then turned and took off running. Where she thought she was going in this wilderness I don't know. Maybe she'd remembered the pistol in my pack and was headed for that. She only got three steps before Delgado caught up with her and flung her to the ground. He was quick. Too damned quick. And Andy had just stood there with his hands hanging at his sides.

Delgado sat Janet down on the ground and stood over her with the pistol. She was his hostage now, his guarantee of everybody else's good behavior.

He sent Andy back to unlock the cuffs and get me out of the plane, and soon all of us, Jack included, were standing on the shore.

Delgado was fingering something in his pocket. The Mexican gold dollars. He glanced at the ladders secured to the float plane, then up through the trees at the snowfield, then at Andy and me. And slowly, greed overcame any doubts he may have had.

He jabbed the pistol at Andy and me. "You two, bring the ladders ashore."

Andy had told him what we intended to use them for. Well, he could use them that way, too. It would be tricky, but as long as he held Janet hostage he ought to be able to bring it off.

We splashed into the icy water and began undoing the tie-downs.

I got close to Andy. "Who has the keys to the aircraft?"

Andy made a face. "He has."

No joy there, but what had I expected?

We got the ladder ashore.

Delgado said: "Jack, you look tired. Wait here in the camp. Take a rest."

"Just what are you up to, Jorge?"

"There's gold in that wrecked plane. Didn't you know? And why shouldn't it be ours instead of theirs?"

But what he really meant was *"mine."*

He made Andy and me reassemble the ladder so it was all one piece. Then he ordered us to carry it up to the snowfield while he followed a safe distance behind with Janet.

The climb up wouldn't have been easy on any account, but the extra burden of the ladder made it that much harder. A couple of times we got stalled and had to halt to catch our breath. Delgado was always below us, and if properly launched the ladder would have made a deadly weapon against him. But there was no way of using it without also mangling Janet.

Eventually we reached the snowfield. Delgado sent Andy back to the camp.

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"And remember who's up here with me. And how easily she could be hurt."

Andy's shoulders slumped. He didn't have any ideas, but maybe by now Jack had some and he'd certainly have the Ruger. So the trick was to play it cool and stay alive until he could do something.

Andy started back toward the camp. Now there was just Janet and me and Delgado. And a couple of empty packs Delgado had had Janet carry up with her. Hers and Andy's, fortunately, or he would have found the Ruger and we'd have had no chance at all.

Delgado jabbed with the pistol. "What are you waiting for?"

"We're waiting for you to tell us what to do," I said.

"What do you think? Use the ladder to crawl out to the plane. The woman goes first. She's lightest."

I disassembled the ladder and shoved one section of it out onto the snowfield. Janet crawled to the end of it with the two empty packs. I shoved the second section out to her. She manuevered it in place in front of the first section so that the two of them formed a continuous track. She crawled out to the end of it. I crawled out to the end of the first section and onto the lower rungs of the second. Then I drew the first section forward until Janet could grab hold of it and work it into place ahead of us. Then we repeated the maneuver. And all the time Delgado stood watching us with the pistol in his hand.

The snow was even rottener than we'd figured. About halfway out to the DC-3 a big chunk of it caved in beneath us. Fortunately the ladder formed a bridge to either side, and all we got was a heart-stopping scare.

We got closer and closer to the broken fuselage of the DC-3. To say that it was a wreck might seem redundant, but it was *really* a wreck. An ancient derelict thrown up by an angry sea, a bent and twisted piece of machinery found in the basement of a bombed-out building. Those were the only analogies that seemed to fit. If it wasn't for the tail section, you wouldn't even have recognized it as an airplane.

We worked the ladders around to a place where there seemed to be a gap in the fuselage. Just as we reached it, Delgado shouted from the edge of the snowfield.

"The woman stays outside on the ladder!"

Where he'd have a clean shot at her.

I worked my way around her. The snow seemed a little firmer here, and our added weight didn't affect it much.

"What are we going to do?" Janet whispered.

"What he tells us."

But she didn't like that, so I whispered something more.

"I told Jack about the Ruger."

"The old guy?"

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He must have seemed old to her, recovering from the wound like he was and looking pale as death. But maybe Delgado and I looked old to her, too. What was she? Nineteen?

"He'll figure a way to use it and get us out of this mess."

I crawled through the jagged hole in the fuselage, ripping my pants leg in the process and leaving a thin line of red on the flesh underneath. The inside was like nothing I can describe—a dark hole with tiny splashes of light where the metal had rusted through. And everything inside was an unrecognizable jumble that smelled faintly of decay. I wondered if any of the corpses had been preserved by the cold and the dry mountain air. Maybe they'd stare at me from out of their desiccated drumskin faces.

Robbing the dead. That was what we were doing. Me, Janet, Andy, Delgado. If there was anything *to* rob.

Janet handed a flashlight in to me. I flicked it on. It didn't help much. Everything was chaos, and the floor, if you could call it that, was two inches deep in a kind of icy muck.

As I moved deeper into the fuselage, I felt it giving way beneath me. This thing wasn't stable. It was only waiting for the right shove in the right place and then it would go sledding the rest of the way down the mountain. It would get all of us then, even Jack and Andy down in the camp, and it would take half the snowfield with it.

I wanted to quit this business and get out. Tell Delgado the gold wasn't here, make him believe it. But something drew me on. Maybe it was the same greed that was working on him, though how I expected to profit from it I didn't know. Or maybe it was something simpler—curiosity.

I began shoving things aside—pieces that would move, anyway. There were creakings and groanings in the fuselage, once even a kind of tilting, though it couldn't have been more than an inch. Sweat popped out on my forehead, and there was a sour taste in my mouth.

I probed with the flashlight beam. Shadows chased themselves around the interior of the fuselage. Rotten shreds hung down, and jagged edges of metal and dripping ice. I pressed forward, dodging them. There was nothing there, not even a shank of bone or a grinning skull.

Then my feet slipped and I went down in the muck on my hands and knees. The flashlight spun away, but it stayed lit and I was able to crawl forward and retrieve it. And in crawling, the palm of my hand encountered the first cluster of coins.

They came out of the muck gleaming yellow, and when I wiped them on my pants leg they gleamed still more. I swept the muck with my hands and found more, in twos and threes, scattered along the length of the fuselage.

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I made my way back to the jagged hole.

I said: "Hand the empty packs in to me."

"Did you find them?"

"I found some of them."

A mixed look of fear and excitement crossed her face. The gold was there. But who would get it?

She leaned forward and gripped my sleeve through the opening. "Don't let him take all of it. Hide some for us."

I shook my head, not refusing but letting her know how unimportant all that was at the moment. Then I pulled loose and retreated back into the fuselage. I heard Delgado shouting at her, trying to discover what I'd found, and I heard her reluctantly answer him.

I began raking through the muck, probing into every nook and cranny. I shoved the coins I found into one of the packs. They were everywhere, but you had to work to locate them. They'd probably come on board in a wooden box, maybe a couple of them, and the crash had torn the boxes apart. The coins must have come flying through the fuselage like shrapnel, horribly maiming anybody unlucky enough to have survived.

I don't know how long I worked—an hour, maybe. Eventually I had what I thought was a sufficient load for the first pack. I figured there were twenty, twenty-five pounds there. How much gold was that? Over a hundred thousand dollars' worth—at least.

I handed the pack out to Janet.

"Bring it to me!" Delgado shouted.

Janet slipped her arms through the pack straps and began crawling along the ladder. I started to follow her, but Delgado gestured with the pistol.

"Stay in the plane! Fill the second pack!"

I retreated into the fuselage again. What were his intentions once I filled this one? He'd be weighing the acquisition of the gold against his primary mission of obtaining the film. And if the weight came down wrong, he'd kill me. Maybe Janet, too. But not Andy. He needed Andy to fly him out. And not Jack, either. Jack was the one who'd have to open the safety-deposit box in case I hadn't lied about that.

I began searching the muck for coins again. They became harder and harder to find. A lot of them must have spilled out onto the mountainside and been carried away. I dumped them muck and all into the bottom of the second pack.

It was hard work, crawling around in there, and after a while I decided to take a break. I scooped a couple of coins out of the pack. I'd been noticing that some of them seemed to be scored and discolored. Now I examined one under the beam of my flashlight. At first I didn't understand what I was seeing. Then I did understand

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and began digging out other coins and examining them, too. A couple that weren't scored I even scraped against a projecting edge of metal.

A few of the coins were solid gold, but all the rest were plated—and maybe not even with gold. And underneath the plating there was nothing but lead. I was looking at the evidence of a fifty-year-old swindle.

Those Hong Kong businessmen who'd bought the tanker—they'd filled the boxes with counterfeit coins, then covered them with just enough real ones to make it look good. And it was a few of those real coins that, by chance, Janet and Andy had found in the stream bed.

But how had the businessmen expected to get away with it? Surely they knew the switch would be discovered as soon as the coins reached the United States, and that would be damned quick. Too quick for them to just disappear with the tanker or sell it to somebody else. Then I thought about the DC-3 and where it had ended up. They'd fixed it somehow so that it would go down over the Pacific. Tampered with the engines, maybe. But, against all expectations, the engines had held out all the way to Anchorage. It was only when the plane took off again that the trouble had begun. So there it was: a 1947 multiple murder uncovered too late to do anyone any good.

I almost laughed then. Laughed at Andy and Janet and myself. Yes, and at Delgado, too. But the situation was much too serious for that. And if Delgado found out about those coins, it would get even worse. So instead of laughing, I got down on my hands and knees and began gathering up more of the worthless things.

After a while, Janet reappeared at the hole in the fuselage, and this time Delgado had come with her. He sat poised at the back end of the ladder, holding the pistol. By then I'd filled the second pack with fifteen or twenty pounds' worth of coins. That would have to be enough for him because I wasn't carrying this farce one step further.

I handed the pack to Janet and she passed it on to Delgado. He hefted it in his hand. Combined with the other pack, he must have figured that he had nearly three hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold now. Still, if there were more . . .

"How much is left?"

"Very little," I called back. "I can hardly find coins anymore."

He made his decision. "You," he said to Janet, "climb into the fuselage with your friend."

"W-what?"

"Do what I tell you!"

I held out my arms and helped Janet inside. We both turned back to the opening. Delgado had retreated with the pack to the

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second ladder. Now he was reaching back for the one beside the fuselage. If he took it away, we'd be trapped there—and the fuselage was dangerously unstable. I made a grab for the ladder and Delgado raised the pistol and fired. The shot whanged off the fuselage and I threw myself backward into Janet. We both ended up in the muck on the floor.

I could hear the snick of the ladder as it slid away—like the runners on a sled. I picked myself up and found an eye-level hole in the fuselage and peered out as Delgado retreated across the snow with the ladders to solid ground.

It was a slow process, and the two of us watched every moment of it helplessly.

"He'll take the plane," Janet said. "He'll strand us here and Andy won't be able to get back for days and days."

If he ever got back—because as far as Delgado was concerned, anybody who knew about the gold was a liability now. And they'd be taking off immediately. Evening was coming down and Delgado would want to get out of there before dark.

Delgado reached solid ground. He shouldered the two packs and headed down toward the camp.

"Come on," I said. Unnecessarily, because Janet was already two steps ahead of me.

As we climbed out onto the snow, the fuselage gave a rumble and tilted again. I thought it was going over then. I thought it was coming down on us. But it just settled down again—like a huge beast readying itself for a spring.

We tried to walk out, but we kept breaking through the snow. So we had to get down on our bellies and squirm. Gravity helped us. The snowfield was tilted toward the lake and we found it easy to slide. I kept looking back at the fuselage. We'd got out of its shadow, but we hadn't got out of the path it would take if it decided to sled toward the lake.

We came to the cave-in and gave it a wide berth. Tumble down there and you'd never get out again. Then we had a piece of luck. Our detour took us into a steeper area of the snowfield. Janet crawled into it first, and then she just went sliding headfirst. She managed to get herself turned around and control her descent by digging in with her heels and elbows. Forewarned, I swung around and followed her.

The end of the snowfield was coming up fast and just beyond it lay a steep drop. Janet managed to steer herself to one side and get into deeper snow and slow down. She still shot off the end of the snowfield but at a reduced velocity. That enabled her to land on the rim of rock there and not go flying off into space. I followed her example, digging in with elbows and heels and fingernails.

We skirted the edge of the snowfield and began our descent. We

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were both scared and breathless but oddly exhilarated, too, by our adventure.

We were halfway down when we heard the shots. Two of them, one on top of the other, like the brief rattle of a drum.

Janet screamed: "Andy!"

But it wasn't Andy. It was Jack and Delgado. Two shots, each from a different caliber weapon.

She rushed heedlessly downward, and I went after her. I didn't catch up until we were down in the trees above the camp, and then I took her down roughly. She struggled in my arms.

"Don't let Delgado make it two out of three," I snapped.

She seemed to get the message then. I let her up and we crept downward through the trees. Finally we came to the edge of the camp and could see the lake. There was a sprawled form on the gravel shore. It was Jack, and he looked no more human than a discarded pile of clothes.

I spotted Delgado. He was wading through the shallows toward the float plane, herding Andy ahead of him with the pistol. Andy was carrying the two packs of Mexican dollars. Forty or fifty pounds of nearly worthless lead. Use them for sinkers the next time you went angling and attract the fish with their pretty gold shine.

Delgado held the pistol in his left hand. His right arm hung stiffly down at his side, and there was a splotch of blood near the shoulder. I thought: You should've aimed a few inches to the left, Jack, and got a lung.

Shot, I thought. Where was Jack's pistol? I spotted it in the gravel just beyond his outstretched hand.

I left the trees then. Moved quickly through the camp and down toward the beach. Not running. Not yet. Get as far as I could before Delgado spotted me. I'd given Janet a little shove before I'd left and she'd gotten the message and not followed me.

They'd reached the plane. Andy was shoving the packs into the cockpit. Delgado would kill him for sure now—just as soon as they reached their destination—the cabin on the lake, probably. And he'd leave Janet and me here to starve because I saw now that he'd dumped all our food in the water. Bits of it were still floating around, and there was a scum of flour on the surface. That was probably when Jack had risked the Ruger. While Delgado was getting rid of the food. Too bad he'd made the mistake of not killing him first shot. Just don't make that mistake yourself, I thought.

Andy was in the cockpit now. Delgado stood on the float, trying to climb up himself but hindered by his wounded arm. I made my final dash for the gun.

Delgado whipped around. He'd seen me.

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I dove past Jack. I could hear him moaning. Delgado fired—and missed.

I had the Ruger. I rolled to my feet. Then stood there, both hands extended, gripping the weapon, as cold and unhurried as someone on a firing range.

Delgado fired again, left-handed when he was right-handed, and panicked by that first miss. The bullet split the air to my left and I drilled him, as Jack should have drilled him, and sent him spinning facedown into the water.

He floated there, arms outstretched, like some new, unwelcome form of aquatic life.

I lowered the weapon and crouched beside Jack. His face was turned toward me, and he croaked something I had to lean close to hear.

"Why is it you're always getting me shot, Mike?"

"I don't know, Jack. Why is it you're always getting me shot at?"

He tried a smile, but halfway through it froze, and he was dead.

I got to my feet. Janet had run out of the wood. Andy was climbing out of the cockpit. I'd have to tell them now about the phony Mexican dollars.

That place had one last surprise for us. It happened as we took off and clawed our way upward into the evening sky. The entire snowfield finally picked up and went cascading down the mountainside into the lake, taking the remains of the DC-3 with it. Water slurped out of the lower end of the lake—as if it were a puddle and a giant foot had crashed down on it—and then raced down the twisting canyon beyond. God help the unlucky moose who found himself in its path—or human being, either.

Janet gave a little yelp when it happened, and maybe I yelped, too. Five minutes sooner and it would have buried us as well.

Andy circled back over the valley again. There was nothing to be seen—not Jack's body under its cairn of stones, not Delgado where we'd dragged him up on the shore, not even the fuselage of the DC-3.

We headed south, finally. I was all by myself in the back. I thought about what I was going to do next—which was sink Ritchie and get my life back. Because Jack had been right about me. I never threw away anything—not without a compelling reason—and I hadn't thrown away the wallet, either. It was in a paper bag with some other stuff under the front seat of the Jeep. He and Delgado should have searched harder.

The great wilderness crept by beneath the plane. I sat back and thought about the look Ritchie was going to have on his face when I finally nailed him with the strip of film. It was almost better than two million dollars in gold. ●

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A Quiet Pool

by Barbara Owens

I was eight years old when Dennis told me he might kill someone someday. He was two years older, and on that nice summer day we were eating grape popsicles under the big lilac bush in my backyard. I was showing him the language I was learning in school when he picked up my notebook, scribbled something on a page, and handed it back to me. That's all it said—I MIGHT KILL SOMEONE SOMEDAY.

I looked at it, at him, and wrote back, WHY?

He shrugged. DON'T KNOW. JUST THINK ABOUT IT SOMETIMES.

YOU GET MAD?

He shrugged again. KIND OF, I GUESS.

AT ME?

He gave me his sweet grin. NO, NEVER YOU.

I didn't know what else to write. He scribbled again. DON'T TELL ANYONE, OKAY?

I nodded. Then he tore the page from the notebook, shredded it into tiny pieces, and buried them under the lilac bush.

I forgot about it then. I remember it now.

Like several other *EQMM* authors, Barbara Owens also writes tales in the science fiction and fantasy genre; she has many credits in our sister publication *Asimov's Science Fiction* and in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. This new story involves a great deal of conversation in sign language, which we have simply indicated with quotation marks. ℙ

I was born deaf. My father is a doctor, my mother a teacher, so I was evaluated by the best for several years, but the answer was always the same. Irrevocable loss. Barring medical miracles, I would never hear a sound.

If my parents were devastated, they never let me know it. From the beginning I was encouraged to lead a normal life, taught to function on my own. I learned not to be intimidated by my handicap, and they were always there to prop me up when I needed it. I

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have always suspected that I remained an only child because they wanted to dedicate themselves to shaping me into a strong person. I love them fiercely for that.

The Prices lived next door and our families were close friends. Dennis was just a toddler when I was born, a sturdy blond boy already wearing his broad grin. It surprised everyone when he quickly laid claim to me. He seemed to sense there was something different about this new baby and he assigned himself the role of protector and friend. He was constantly pushing others away from me, insisting loudly, "Mine! Mine!" And he was the one who gave me the nickname I still carry—Lissa, because he could not manage a mouthful like Melissa. I have no childhood memories that do not include him.

I was enrolled at an early age in special classes that taught me the rudimentary signing skills, but I was fascinated when I saw other people move their mouths at one another. I wanted to do that, too. I was still too young to understand that not everyone lived in a world of silence.

Dennis elected to take matters into his own hands. He had started school by then, so he undertook to teach me the alphabet. Then, with the aid of pictures and highly dramatic demonstrations, he showed me that putting the letters together made words and that words meant things. I was enthralled. The world was opening up for me. When I was able to read simple sentences Dennis taught me how to write. I still remember the first written communication between us.

He pointed to himself. I AM DENNIS. Then he poked me in the chest. YOU ARE LISSA. WRITE IT DOWN.

I wrote, I AM LISSA. YOU ARE DENNIS.

He thought seriously for a minute, then wrote, YOUR EARS IS HURT AND CANT BE FIXED. BUT I WILL TEACH YOU ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW.

He did a good job. When I was finally old enough to be enrolled in a school for the hearing-impaired, I could read and write far above my age level. My confidence soared. I began to learn ASL, American Sign Language, and then it was my turn to teach him. Many hours were filled with flying fingers as we learned from one another.

Looking back, I'm amazed at the patience shown by such a young and energetic boy. Dennis never tired of my company, and he never lost his determination to make me as much like others of my age as he could. He taught me not to be afraid to try things. I climbed trees, learned to swim and ride a bike, hung by my knees from his backyard gym with my eyes closed. Dennis was always there to catch me if I fell.

It wasn't as though he didn't have other friends. Dennis was that rarity, someone everyone, young and old, wanted to be with.

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He was forever shooting off somewhere with a gang of boys to do the things boys do. He was good at everything he tried, smart in school, active in sports. Things came easily for him. He always knew the right thing to say or do. He was also an only child, and his parents expected great things from him. He never disappointed them. Still, he always had time for me.

"I wish I understood noises," I signed to him one rainy afternoon. I must have been about ten then, and he was twelve. We were playing Monopoly at my kitchen table. He was letting me win and I was irked; I thought I was perfectly capable of winning on my own. "Tell me about noises. My teacher tried, but I still don't get it."

Dennis tipped his head back and closed his eyes. This meant he was thinking. Then he looked at me and his mouth moved. I flashed, "What?"

He signed, "I just said, 'Let's get something to eat.' My voice made a noise. There are all kinds of noises and sounds. You can't hear them because of your ears."

I mulled that. "Do I have a voice? Can I make noises?"

"Sure. You make sounds all the time. They're not real words because you have to hear the sounds to make them come out right."

"I want to make a sound. Show me how to do it."

He grinned. "Okay. I'm hungry, are you? What would you like to have?"

That didn't take any thinking. "Ice cream."

"Then watch." He moved his mouth with a great show of lips and teeth. "I said 'ice cream.' Do it just like I did."

It took several attempts. I could feel vibrations in my throat and chest. Dennis finally pronounced it close enough and we hauled out the bowls. My heart was pounding. I had taken another step.

But somehow it made me feel sad, too. "I wish I wasn't deaf." I had never told that to anyone before. "I wish I knew what my noises sound like. And noises like babbling brooks. And sighs. I read about them. I want to know what they sound like."

Dennis watched my fingers and he looked sad, too.

"I wish you could, Lissa. But you want to know something? Sometimes I wish I was like you. Nothing inside but peace and quiet. No sounds or feelings that seem to fill you up and you can't make them go away. Pulling you in all directions until they get so big inside you that you think you're going to pop."

His fingers fell silent on the table. Then, after a long moment, he looked up at me and smiled. "We read a poem in school that made me think of you. It was about a quiet pool in the woods where all your troubles go away. Everything just gets still and peaceful. That's the way I feel when I'm with you. You're like my own quiet pool."

"Are they bad noises and feelings?" I asked him.

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"Pretty bad sometimes. I don't know where they come from. All I know is that you make them go away."

"Does everyone who hears have them?"

"I don't know. I just know I do."

"You should tell your mom and dad."

A quick shake of the head. "I've never told anyone but you." Then he straightened. "And don't you tell anyone, okay? This is just between you and me."

He knew I would do anything for him. "Okay. And I'll be glad to be your quiet pool."

His grin flashed. "Will be forever?"

"Forever and ever."

Our Monopoly game continued. I won.

When Dennis started high school he discovered girls. Actually, they discovered him first, but he didn't notice. He was growing tall and very handsome. One gift of his smile and girls started going blocks out of their way to stroll past his house. His mother, beaming, told mine that one girl after another was calling him on the phone for help with homework. Dennis seemed a little proud of himself, too.

"Both Tammy Dorso and Kim Thomas are turning guys down because they want me to ask them to the Homecoming Dance," he told me one fall afternoon. He had just come home from football practice looking sweaty and smug.

"How do you know that?"

"Because Sue Wallace told me. She's a friend of theirs."

"So which one are you going to take?"

"Neither one. I asked Sue."

I shook my head. "Dennis! Is that nice?"

"Hey," he defended himself, "I was going to ask her anyway. I can't help it if they want me to ask them, can I?"

Of course he couldn't. He and Sue Wallace were crowned Homecoming King and Queen; Tammy and Kim continued to stroll past his house.

When my school scheduled a Christmas party I went to Dennis for help. There would be dancing in which we were all encouraged to participate.

I caught him on a Saturday morning on his way out of the house. "They're teaching us to feel the vibrations from the music and I'm getting there," I told him. "But I need all the practice I can get."

"Say no more. My folks are out. We'll go to my house so we can crank it up."

"But you're on your way out. We can—"

He caught my hands to still them. "That can wait. You are more important, Lissa."

My mother just shook her head when I told her. "That boy is

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almost too good to be true."

"No," I signed back. "That's just Dennis, Mom."

I danced almost every dance when the big night came. Dennis had taught me well; one of my teachers told me that I moved like I could hear the music. I almost thought I could.

I started high school, one of the best in the country for the hearing-impaired. It was a wonderful time. I was on the swim team, made good grades and good friends, and decided before my freshman year was out that I wanted to come back to teach there after college. My parents were delighted.

"You'll make a wonderful teacher," my dad told me. "It's in your genes."

My mother hugged me. "Like I've always told you, Lissa, decide what you want to do and then do it. Simple as that."

Dennis was pleased, too. "And as pretty as you are, all the boys will be in love with you, you know."

He was streaking through high school in high gear, seemingly everywhere at once—captain of this, chairman of that, receiving an award for something else. Girlfriends came and went before I could get used to them.

"Why don't you get to know one girl before you're off to another?" I teased him.

He gave me his usual grin and shrug. "Oh, Lissa, you know me. I want it all. I don't stick to things. Besides, Dad and I are already making plans for college. Big steps, you know. I have to make the right decisions."

"There's time, Dennis," I told him. "You can slow down a little."

"Not me. Just don't know how. I've got to try it all." That was Dennis. But I wasn't worried. He could do anything.

When he got his driver's license his parents bought him a car. He spirited me away from home one afternoon and drove out to the old lake road.

"Would you like to learn to drive?" he asked me when we got there.

"I'm not old enough."

"Who'll know? We'll go to the park. It's quiet there."

"But I'll be taking Driver's Ed next year. I can learn then."

"I want to teach you," he insisted. "*I* do."

That made me smile, thinking of little Dennis shoving people away from me, stubbornly insisting, "Mine! Mine!"

Of course he knew I wanted to learn. So he taught me, first swearing me to secrecy. Several sessions on the quiet park drives and I was ready to try the lake road. Such power, such control. Never have I felt so omnipotent as during those first few times behind the wheel.

Dennis gloated. "Wait till you get to Driver's Ed. They'll think

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the girl's a natural, she must have been born to drive."

I dated casually in high school. Mostly I waited to be grown. There were so many things I wanted to sample out there in the world. Dennis and I often took long aimless drives through the countryside. He said it relaxed him, just driving and not thinking. He said he always felt good in the silence of me. I remembered.

"Your quiet pool."

He smiled. "Will be forever?"

"Forever and ever."

He squeezed my hand. For a moment we were children again.

Dennis graduated near the top of his class. He would be going away to college, but not so far that he couldn't come home often. He hadn't decided what to study. His father was urging him towards a legal career.

"You write to me, Lissa. At least once a week, promise?"

"I promise."

"And I'll be here as fast as I can if you need me."

I had no doubts about that.

When he was first gone I missed him terribly, but I was soon caught up in my own activities and his loss gradually became easier to bear. We wrote faithfully. He wanted to know everything I was doing on a daily basis and I tried to oblige. I was learning to lipread a little, I told him, but I wasn't satisfied with it. Too confining—signing was so much more satisfactory. I told him I had passed Driver's Ed with flying colors. I knew he would appreciate that.

He had joined a fraternity. He was on the track team. He still hadn't decided on a major. He was making good grades, but there were a lot of smart people in college so he had to hustle; he was having to study harder than he had in high school. He dated a nice girl named Bonnie, then a nice girl named Trish, then a super girl named Carol. None of them seemed to last long.

He came home frequently, on weekends and holidays, full of tales of exploits. Sometimes I thought he looked tired, and sometimes it seemed he was avoiding old friends, spending most of his time with me. We took quite a few long drives into quiet places.

"Are you all right, Dennis?" I asked on one such venture. "Is something on your mind?"

He pulled in to a rest stop and we sat quietly for several minutes. "I don't know what it is with me, Lissa," he said finally. "I'm not—I don't know how to take hold, you know? I'm just never satisfied. I want so many things that I can't concentrate on any one of them, just go round and round in circles. It's the damnedest thing. How do you know when you make the right decision? I get so frustrated when things get in my way or don't turn out the way I think they should. Just can't handle it."

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I didn't understand, but I tried to help. "I think it's hard to grow up," I finally signed. "But it's okay to make mistakes, you know. I'll bet everyone makes a wrong decision now and then."

That brought a quick shake of the head. "Not me. The pressure's always there—be the best." He smiled at me. "Sometimes I think you're the only thing holding me together, Lissa. As long as I have you I'll be okay." Then he started the car and we drove some more.

A large number of friends and relatives gathered for a party in our backyard following my high school graduation. Dennis and his family were there. He brought his latest girlfriend, a very pretty girl named Rachel.

"This might be the one," he signed to me when we were alone for a minute. "She's special."

"I like her," I signed back. "I'm happy for you."

He poked me on the shoulder. "So when are you going to fall in love?"

"Not for a long, long time."

"You let me know. He'll have to have my approval."

I hugged him. "I promise. You'll be one of the first to know."

It was a good day, a very happy day for me.

I started college in the fall, a school for the hearing-impaired. Soon my life was so busy there hardly seemed time enough for everything. I couldn't wait to graduate and begin teaching. Things seemed to be falling into place right on schedule.

Dennis and Rachel became engaged at Christmas. He had decided against a career in law and was studying for a business degree. Rachel's father was a partner in an advertising agency and there was a place waiting for Dennis when he was ready. It was then that my mother told me that both families had always secretly hoped that he and I would marry.

"Oh, Mom," I told her, "that's not the way it is with Dennis and me. There's never been anything romantic in how we feel."

When he came home for spring vacation that year he brought the news that he had broken off the engagement. We took one of our long drives and I told him how sorry I was. He seemed remarkably unaffected by it.

"Don't be sorry, Lissa. It just didn't feel right. I may have wanted her just because she had another boyfriend when I met her." He grinned. "There'll be other girls. Always are."

He was thinking of changing his major again, but nothing excited him.

"You could teach," I suggested. "Look at all the things you taught me."

"No, not for me. Too confining—too something. I'll find what I

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want. Something to turn me on. It's out there somewhere."

He continued to come home often and I saw him as much as I could, but my days were so full I couldn't take the long drives he seemed to enjoy so much. I came home one evening to find his car in my driveway.

"Hey, girl, don't you have time for me anymore?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Dennis, I'm just so busy. Aren't you? School takes up almost all my time. How do you manage?"

"Don't take it so seriously, that's how. What does it matter, after all? Life's short, Lissa. Want to go for a drive?"

Was this the same Dennis who had so recently been worried about making all the right decisions? I relented that time, but the next time I found him in my driveway I had to beg off. Things were different now, I told myself. We weren't carefree kids anymore, we were adults. Dennis would understand.

There were a few more girlfriends in the next year and a half, but none so serious as Rachel, and none that endured. When Dennis graduated he went to work for an insurance firm. And being Dennis, he did very well.

I met Logan Russell at a party during my junior year. We were both with someone else, but he told me later that from the time he laid eyes on me he stopped looking for the right girl. We went out together the following night.

We fit exactly right from the beginning. He was tall and brown-eyed, had a wicked sense of humor, and he seemed to know exactly where he belonged in the world. He had partial hearing but relied mostly on signing, and we never ran out of things to say to one another. He was a few years older than I with a very good job in computer programming. Before long we were seeing one another every night.

I was so surprised at the depth of my feelings for him that I had to look into the mirror to be sure I was the same old Lissa. Instead of the determined and serious student bent on nothing but achievement, I was suddenly giggly and breathless just thinking about him. It was an aspect of myself I was totally unfamiliar with and I enjoyed it very much.

My parents fell instantly in love with him, and his did the same for me. Dennis and he hit it off, too.

"You've got a winner there," Dennis told me. "So long as he knows I'm part of the package."

"He knows all about you, Dennis," I assured him. "I've told him you're as close to me as a brother."

He nodded. "Then I wish you all the best."

My life took on a whole new, vaguely rosy glow. Logan respected my time and goals and I respected his. After only a few short

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months he asked me to marry him, and I wasted no time in giving him my answer. We set a date for two weeks after my graduation. I would be a typically corny June bride and I didn't mind a bit.

I still saw Dennis as often as possible. Sometimes Logan and I would go out with Dennis and a date, sometimes just the three of us would go somewhere. Logan accepted our closeness, but he did make what I considered a strange comment one time. He told me he suspected that I was more a part of Dennis than he was of me. I wasn't sure what he meant at the time.

Logan and I discussed what we wanted in apartments. We decided to honeymoon on the West Coast; I had always wanted to see big mountains. Several weeks before my graduation we went to dinner at our favorite restaurant. Logan seemed distracted, and during the meal he looked across at me and signed, "Lissa, about the West Coast . . ."

"We aren't going? Is something wrong?"

"Let me tell you what's happened. I've gotten a job offer out there, a really good offer. Much more money and it puts me square in the middle of the computer industry. I want to take it. But I know how much you want to stay here and teach, so I'm leaving it up to you. If you don't want to go, I won't accept it."

I had never once considered leaving my hometown, my family, everything that was familiar to me. The West Coast seemed like another world. But as Logan explained and I watched his eyes light up, the idea began to excite me, too.

"I don't know how you can turn it down," I told him. "I'm sure I can teach out there. As a matter of fact, there's an excellent school for the deaf there."

His eyes crinkled. "I know."

"Then let's do it. Take it. I'll go."

"It's a big step, a lot of miles away. Be sure."

"My family has always encouraged me to decide what I want to do and then do it. I want this. If you're going to be there, I'm sure."

My parents were supportive, as always. They swore to visit often. My father even hinted that retirement wasn't too many years down the road and he'd always liked the idea of living his out in sun and sand. Suddenly everything was taking off in an exciting new direction.

Dennis was surprisingly subdued in his reaction. We took one of our increasingly rare drives so that I could tell him, and he didn't respond for several minutes. Finally he signed, "I don't know what to say, Lissa. I'm happy for you—and for him. But I'll really miss you. We've never been apart. What will I do without you?"

"Oh, Dennis, we'll always be close, no matter how far apart we are. But it's different now. I'm getting married, you'll get married, we'll both have families. It could just as easily be you moving

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away, you know."

His look was reproachful. "I'd never leave you. You mean too much to me. I never imagined not having you around when I need you."

I was probably too excited and happy to realize how serious he was. I clearly remember saying, "But I love Logan, Dennis. I need *him.* It'll be all right, you'll see. You can come visit all the time." I thought that settled it nicely.

Since we would be moving west permanently, Logan and I canceled our honeymoon plans. He was working late hours on his final project with his company and I concentrated on my upcoming graduation. I didn't see much of Dennis during the following week or two. Sometimes I wondered if he was avoiding me, but I was so caught up in my own plans that I didn't give it much serious thought.

When I came home from one late night at the library my parents were waiting for me in our living room. I knew instantly that something was wrong. My mother had been crying and my father's face was drawn and white. They cried and held me when they told me. Logan had been coming home from work along the old lake road when he apparently fell asleep at the wheel and drove off the cliff into the lake. He was already dead when a passing motorist noticed the break in the safety barrier and called the police.

I moved like a zombie through the following days. The funeral was unreal. I was too numb to cry. How could this have happened? Logan was such a good and careful driver. Why hadn't he pulled over if he got sleepy? How could I go on without him?

As always, Dennis was there for me. "It's okay, Lissa," he kept telling me. "Hold on to me. You'll get through this."

Graduation came and went in a fog. Suddenly I was an adult, adrift in a world that seemed very large and empty. I didn't know what to do with myself, where to turn.

A friend coaxed me out to lunch one day. I hadn't seen her since the funeral and our conversation was awkward at first. Finally, I began to talk about Logan and how much I missed him. I knew I had to do it sometime, before I could move on. I cried and she cried with me.

"He was such a great guy, Lissa. It's just not fair. If only someone had found him sooner. I'm surprised Dennis didn't see it happen. I saw him coming off the lake road not fifteen minutes after they say it happened."

I blinked away tears. "Dennis? On the lake road?"

"Didn't he tell you? I'd been visiting my sister and was just getting into my car when he drove by."

My brain felt thick. "Are you sure?"

"Lissa, I've known Dennis all my life. I know his car. It was Dennis, driving like he always does, a wild man. He might have saved Logan if he'd seen him go off the road."

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Dennis and I had spent so many nights driving that narrow old road. He must have known every inch of it. Why hadn't he told me he'd been there that night?

Over the next two days troublesome thoughts, dark thoughts, began to swirl around inside my head. Forbidden thoughts. I didn't want them but they were there and, no matter what arguments I used to dispel them, they wouldn't go away.

On the third day I asked Dennis to take me for a drive, and once underway I told him I wanted to go out to the old lake road. His eyes went wide.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said.

"I need to see where it happened. Go with me, please."

We didn't speak until we reached the spot where the railing was still splintered, barred by a highway barricade. The water below it looked deep and cold. I hoped I wouldn't cry and I didn't. Instead I studied the sharp turn in the road just beyond, cut around a bulging face of rock. Dennis watched me as we crept along. Suddenly I had the words to fit the ominous darkness inside my head.

I looked directly into his eyes when I signed, "Where were you when it happened, Dennis?"

His face went still. A deep flush began at his throat and inched upward.

"Where? What do you mean?"

"I know you were here, on this road, that night. Someone saw you."

A slight distortion of the truth, but it worked. The flush spread and his eyes slid away. I reached across and turned his face toward mine so that he could read my fingers.

"Did you see the accident? Did you let him die? Or did you cause it? Did you force him off the road?"

The truth shot through his eyes, my worst fears confirmed. "Pull over," I told him, and he did. For a long moment neither of us moved.

"Tell me," I said, and I would have waited forever for him to do so.

He drew a deep breath and let it out. Years ago he had taught me this was a sigh. I had practiced doing it myself even though I would never hear it. Then he turned on the seat to face me, pulling together a ghost of his old smile.

"I've never understood this thing inside me," he said. "But I've always had it, you know that. And being with you has always held me together, don't ask me why. I could always come to you and feel safe."

"I know. A quiet pool. Tell me about Logan."

The edges of his smile trembled. "It was okay for you to marry him, honest. I liked Logan and I could see he made you happy. I wanted you to be happy, Lissa. And even if you married him I told myself you'd be there for me. But when you told me you were going away—" His fingers stilled and he shook his head. I waited.

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"You said you *needed* him. Not me, him. It was like you'd pulled the world out from under me. The more I thought about it, the scareder I got. I couldn't go it without you. It's as simple as that. I needed *you.* I don't want you to think I had anything against Logan because I didn't."

"He was just one of those things that got in your way."

"I couldn't let him take you away. So I followed him home a few nights to figure out his schedule. Then I waited around the turn there. I knew no one else would be on this road that late at night." I watched him swallow hard. "When I heard him coming, I waited until the last minute to shoot around the corner there and head straight for him with my brights. It was over in a minute."

I couldn't respond; I couldn't move. The thought of Logan, startled, blinded, swerving and sinking into the cold water before he knew what was happening, was more than I could comprehend. Then Dennis leaned toward me and gently touched my cheek.

"Tell me you understand. I didn't see any other way to stop you from going. I honestly don't think he suffered much."

His look was tender, supplicating, utterly guilt-free. He wanted me to tell him it was all right, that he had done the only thing he could. And then he said, "Don't tell anyone, okay?"

Don't tell anyone. Always "don't tell anyone." Rage came cold and welcome. I owed him so much. But not that much. "Take me home," I said. Once there, I had my mother call the police.

Dennis didn't stand up under questioning very long. He gave a full confession, expressing no remorse. He still believed he had no other choice.

I went to court with an interpreter to testify as to what he had told me. He looked sick and shrunken during my time on the stand. I'm sure he believes to this day that the only person he ever completely trusted betrayed him.

Maybe I should have told someone years ago about the things he felt inside. But I didn't understand and I didn't take it seriously enough. I believed in Dennis. Everyone did.

He will be in prison for many more years before he is eligible for parole. He still writes to my parents, although they have never responded. He begs them to persuade me to come see him. "He says to remind you that you promised. 'Forever and ever,' he said," my mother told me once. "I assume you know what that means."

Of course I know.

I moved away from my hometown, not to the West Coast, but far away. I no longer think about what my life with Logan might have been. I teach, and that is satisfying. I will probably marry someday. Whatever happens, I know I will survive. I'm not at all sure that Dennis will. ●

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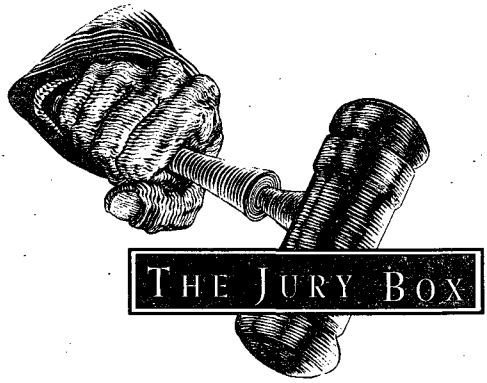

by Jon L. Breen

Among authors who write under more than one name, Evan Hunter may be unique. After becoming a bestselling mainstream novelist in the '50s with *The Blackboard Jungle* and other books published under the Hunter byline, he adopted a mystery-writing pseudonym that ultimately would become even more famous: Ed McBain. In 2000, Five Star published a pair of short-story collections: *Running from Legs and Other Stories* by Ed McBain a.k.a. Evan Hunter and *Barking at Butterflies and Other Stories* by Evan Hunter a.k.a. Ed McBain ($22.95 each). And now he has collaborated with himself on a novel.

**** Evan Hunter and Ed McBain: *Candyland,* Simon & Schuster, $25. If these two alter egos are in competition, I enjoyed McBain's second-half New York police procedural more than Hunter's first-half case history of a sex addict's night on the town, but both have the insistent readability and professional sheen that have made them/him a giant of popular fiction for half a century. The two halves make a united whole, and the collaborators leave you with plenty to think about, including sex-crime specialist Emma Boyle's debatably broad definition of rape. (Don't be distracted as I was by a recurrent date discrepancy in the first half: It's apparently not a clue at all but an error that copyeditors should have caught.)

**** Steven Saylor: *Last Seen in Massilia,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. The ageing Gordianus the Finder and son-in-law Davus travel to the war-torn Roman Empire outpost of the title in search of adopted son Meto, an aide to Julius Caesar. The telling is as fine as ever, and the closing chapters pile surprise on surprise. An especially interesting tidbit is the role in Massilian society, enviable up to a point, of the scapegoat. A valuable

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concluding note identifies the historical sources from which Saylor has woven his fiction.

**** Val Davis: *The Return of the Spanish Lady,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $22.95. In her fourth adventure, airplane archaeologist Nick Scott joins a team searching Alaska for the remains of a Japanese plane shot down during World War II. How will that search be connected to the parallel story of New York *World* reporter Ned Duffy's coverage of a subway disaster in 1918? This is a first-rate thriller in every respect, masterfully balancing plot, pace, and character development. It may be even more pleasurable if you skip the jacket copy, which (assuming it resembles the blurb on my advance proof) unnecessarily gives away the very clever central plot twist.

**** Joe Gores: *Stakeout on Page Street and Other DKA Files,* Crippen & Landru, $16 trade paper; $40 signed hardcover. In his substantial introduction and story notes, Gores shows how closely both the plots and the continuing characters of his unique private-eye procedural series about Daniel Kearny Associates were drawn from his own experience as part of a San Francisco firm called Dave Kikkert and Associates. All but one of these dozen well-crafted and deftly written stories, most of which concern the real-life private-eye work of car repossession, first appeared in *EQMM.* A checklist of all Gores's mystery fiction—books, stories, screenplays, and TV scripts—is appended.

*** Bill Pronzini: *Oddments: A Short Story Collection,* Five Star, $21.95. The latest collection from one of the field's masters has 14 stories, most previously uncollected. Half are from *EQMM,* including one from 2000, the haunting "I Think I Will Not Hang Myself Today." Though there is one Nameless story and a couple of other detective tales, including the impossible-crime tale "The Arrowmont Prison Riddle," the emphasis this time is on twist-in-the-tail crime stories.

** Agatha Christie: *Spider's Web,* adapted as a novel by Charles Osborne; St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. These adaptations of Christie stage plays probably aren't really getting better—I'm just getting used to their quirks and grateful for any previously unvisited whodunit by the writer voted best of the 20th century by the Denver Bouchercon. Forget the pretense that this is a novel and visualize it as a play, which works especially well if you remember Margaret Lockwood (of Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*), the star for whom the main character, a fun-loving upper-crust wife trying to conceal an inconvenient country-house murder, was created back in 1954.

Marvin Lachman began writing about American regional mysteries in fanzines of the

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early '70s, at a time when strong regional content in crime fiction was relatively rare. In the years since, the field has exploded. Lachman's long-awaited book on the phenomenon, *The American Regional Mystery* (Crossover Press, 2333 Minneapolis Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55406; $50), is a readable, informative, thorough, and accurate cross-country tour, full of apt quotations and reading tips.

One product of the trend Lachman documents is the regional anthology. *Orange Pulp: Stories of Mayhem, Murder, and Mystery* (University Press of Florida, $24.95), edited by Maurice J. O'Sullivan and Steve Glassman, has a meaty historical introduction on Florida mystery fiction and substantial notes on authors ranging from Mary Roberts Rinehart to Charles Willeford, but I don't like a mystery anthology to stress novel excerpts (six) over complete stories (three).

Other books for the reference shelf: Martha Hailey DuBose's *Women of Mystery: The Lives and Works of Notable Women Crime Novelists* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $26.95), with several chapters by Margaret Caldwell Thomas, a well-written compendium, stronger on biography than criticism, primarily bringing together information familiar from other secondary sources; Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Doubleday, $25), a combination autobiography and writer's manual that is successful in both roles; and the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association's *100 Favorite Mysteries of the Century* (Crum Creek Press, 484 E. Carmel Dr. #378, Carmel, IN 46032; $12), edited by Jim Huang, with a good reading list plus some entertaining commentary by the member dealers. Combining reference value with a lot of good stories is Mike Ashley's *The Mammoth Book of Locked-Room Mysteries and Impossible Crimes* (Carroll & Graf, $11.95), including classics by John Dickson Carr, Clayton Rawson, Jacques Futrelle, and others; "The Problem of the Crowded Cemetery," one of Edward D. Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne tales from *EQMM;* and new stories by a variety of contemporaries, among them an especially clever Inspector Ghote story by H.R.F. Keating, "The Legs That Walked."

Serious students of the greatest unsolved serial-murder case will find invaluable *The Ultimate Jack the Ripper Companion* (Carroll & Graf, $35), edited by Stewart P. Evans and Keith Skinner, which includes all of Scotland Yard's files on the murders plus photographs and other documents.

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Light Switch, Mirror, Stairs

by Henry Slesar

He was in a cavernous hotel dining room with a three-story skylight adding glare to a sea of white tablecloths. Only a few tables were occupied, and he walked past the silent diners searching every face. Near the exit, there were four white-coated doctors, their stethoscopes beside their plates like some obscene kind of cutlery. They might have been the emergency-room doctors, but he wasn't sure. All he knew for certain was that his wife wasn't there. His dead wife. His beloved Anne.

"[Henry Slesar] is known for clean prose and surprise endings, something that led to large numbers of his stories being adapted to TV by Alfred Hitchcock," William DeAndrea remarks in *Encyclopedia Mysteriosa*. Over the years Mr. Slesar has also written hundreds of scripts for TV series ranging from *The Edge of Night* to *The Twilight Zone*. Stories such as the following perfectly exemplify the clean style and twisty plotting behind his success. †

"So what kind of therapist is he?" Brig said. There was a small twitch in the corner of his mouth, but he managed to keep an unseemly twinkle out of his eyes. He was talking to a bereaved man, after all. Even a joker like Brig had to respect that.

"I didn't say he was a therapist." Alan Perry swallowed the rest of his drink, ice chips and all. "He's got a degree in psychology, but he's more of a research scientist."

"And you're what, his guinea pig?"

"I knew I should have kept my mouth shut." Alan slapped his napkin on the table and signaled to the waiter, scribbling in the air.

"No, wait," Brig said hurriedly. "I really want to hear this. We all kept hoping you'd see somebody, Alan. Someone to help you work through your grief, that kind of thing. Tell me what this guy Rackley is doing for you."

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Alan hesitated and said: "He's helping me dream."

He launched into an explanation without much hope of credibility. Brig Adams wore his skepticism the way he wore his clothes, faithful to tweedy jackets, turtleneck sweaters in gray or oatmeal, always a pair of dove-gray pants with knife-sharp creases. They had been friends since their junior year at Tufts, inseparable until their Perfect Women came along. Now Brig was divorced from his Teri and death had parted Alan from his Anne.

"It's called lucid dreaming," he said. "Ever hear of it?"

"No."

"All it means is that you know you're dreaming, that you're aware that the experience you're having isn't real. Ever have a dream like that?"

Brig shrugged his big shoulders. "I never remember my dreams. I open my eyes and they break up like patchy fog."

"I think I remember having lucid dreams when I was a kid. I once dreamed about a microscope I wanted, and there it was, right in my grubby little hands. But I knew it was only a dream, so I flung the damned thing as hard as I could, hoping it would break right through the wall of my dream and into reality . . . " He grinned ruefully. "I remember waking up and feeling around the bed covers, but it wasn't there."

"So this guy Rackley is teaching you what? How to improve your throwing arm?"

"He's trying to train me. Rackley believes it's a skill people can develop. You have to teach yourself dream recall, so you can learn the shapes and patterns of your dreams . . ."

"So anybody can do this?"

"Assuming they have—incentive."

"Like what?"

The check had arrived, and Brig beat him to the grab.

"Some people like to know where they're going at night," Alan said. "Rackley thinks people trained in lucid dreaming can overcome their nightmares, can understand their own subconscious a little bit better. . . . Nobody knows all the potential. It's still in the exploratory stage."

"And why do you want to be one of the explorers?"

Alan looked at his watch. It was almost midnight. They were the last diners in the restaurant. He stood up.

"Because there's another step," he said, buttoning and unbuttoning his jacket. "It's called dream control. That's what I want to learn, Brig. It's not enough, just to be aware that I'm dreaming. You know what movie actors always say? They want to direct. Well, so do I."

"You want to direct your own dreams."

"Yes. Wouldn't you like to do that?"

"I wouldn't mind flapping my arms and flying around the city,"

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Brig said dryly. "Especially when the traffic is bad."

"I want something more than that," Alan said. He was all the way to the exit before he added the next sentence. "I want to see Anne again."

He was on a golf course. A helicopter was clattering overhead, and he wondered why the foursome ahead of him wasn't complaining about the noise. One of them was a woman, slim, long blond hair, teeth that flashed whitely even at a distance. Had to be Anne. Had to be, had to be. He began to run, but the green sloped upwards, steeper than it had first appeared, growing steeper by the moment, and now he lost sight of the foursome, lost sight of the slim-figured, blond-headed, teeth-flashing woman who might have been Anne. Anne. ANNE.

"Why a golf course?" Rackley asked.

He was a short, moustachioed man with a comfortable paunch. The Monopoly man, Alan thought, not sure why. Then he remembered the cartoon figure on the Monopoly board. That was Rackley.

"We met at a golf club," Alan said. "My friend Brigham Adams—we work at the same law firm—he introduced us. We made a foursome out of it, me, Anne, Brig, Teri."

"And did you think 'golf course' before you went to sleep?"

"I'm not sure," Alan said. "I've been pretty much concentrating on our house in Pelham. We lived there for almost four years."

"And that's where your wife had the accident."

"Yes," Alan said. "That's why I moved out, put the house up for sale. I've been living at the Union Club since."

Rackley waited in silence.

"She fell down the stairs," Alan said. "On this slippery carpet her mother bought us. It was old, Persian; her mother loved old carpets. There was no nap left on the damned thing."

"You're sure that's how it happened."

"No." Alan's hand brushed his forehead. "I'm not sure of anything. I was on my way home, from L.A. I spend a lot of time on the coast. I'm an entertainment lawyer. That isn't as entertaining as it sounds. Contract negotiations on just one picture can take weeks. Anne used to come with me; she loved those palm-tree hotels, the Bel Air, the Beverly Wilshire. But she didn't know anyone, she got bored. She decided to stay East when I traveled. She saw a lot of her mother. It was her mother who found her, at the foot of the stairs. Her neck was broken. By the time I got back, she was in the emergency room of St. John's." He paused. "I dreamed about it once."

"A lucid dream?"

"Just a dream. I saw her at the bottom of the stairs. Legs and arms at crazy angles. It was horrible."

"But you haven't dreamed of her since," Rackley said.

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"I want to. It's been six months, and I haven't seen Anne once in my dreams. That's unnatural, isn't it?"

"Dreams aren't 'natural,'" Rackley said gently. "Dreams don't have logic. We don't believe they carry messages or warnings or anything like that. They're scraps from your waking mind, clues to your inner self. It doesn't mean you've forgotten your wife."

"I haven't," Alan said, his throat tightening around a sob.

A man was beating a dog on his front lawn. He threw open his window and yelled at him to stop. Brig looked up and laughed. There was no dog. Brig looked young, handsome. He had been better-looking in his twenties. His thirties put cynical lines around his mouth and eyes. There was a convertible in the driveway, its top down. Teri was in the driver's seat, holding her Jack Russell on her lap. Alan was in the backseat. He was looking down at himself, but Anne wasn't there. Anne should have been on the seat beside him. But she wasn't there.

"So you think you're ready," Rackley said.

"I've had three lucid dreams now," Alan said. "I knew they were dreams, that I wasn't dealing with reality. But there was nothing I could do about them. I couldn't seat the right people in that dining room—"

"The one with the skylight."

"Yes. And the golf course. I knew that course, it was in Westchester. I've played on it a dozen times, but it doesn't have those steep greens . . . And last night, my friend Brig picking us up in that old convertible of his, the one he cracked up years ago . . ."

"So you knew what was happening, but you couldn't change any of it."

"That's right. The dream was controlling me. I want to get to the next phase, Doctor."

"Please!" The Monopoly man held up a pudgy hand and his thick moustache moved with his smile. "I'm not a doctor, Mr. Perry, not the kind you mean."

"You still may have the prescription I need," Alan said. "Show me how to control my dreams. How I can go where I want to go, see what I want to see. . . . You said you thought I was a good candidate."

"I still do. I just need to make sure you don't have false expectations. There are limits to what you can accomplish."

"I know that," Alan said, with a fervor that was close to anger. "I don't need all the disclaimers, Mr. Rackley. First day I was here, you mentioned something about a 'light switch' test. Couldn't we start with that?"

"They don't call it a 'test,'" Rackley said. "It was part of a study by some dream researchers. They recognized that there might be phys-

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iological problems, that brain activity can affect dream activity . . ."

"I don't get that," Alan said.

"Well, imagine having a dream about being in a dark room. If the visual cortex isn't active, then we might assume you can't make the room light again."

"Is that where your 'light switch' is? In that room?"

Rackley got out of his chair. Moving lightly on his feet, he went to the desk and picked up a notepad. When he returned, he said: "I'm going to give you an assignment. A 'task,' some researchers call it. I'm going to ask you to concentrate your pre-sleep thoughts on finding a light switch in the next indoor setting you see in your dreams."

"Any kind of light switch?"

"It may take awhile. It may never appear. Dreams don't come with guarantees. But when you do see that switch, I want you to turn it on. See if it works. See if it makes your dream space lighter. When you can accomplish this, we'll go on to the next phase."

"Which is what?"

"That's not important right now." When he saw Alan's back stiffen, he shrugged. "All right. The next step is the mirror. After you can turn the light on, you'll have to look for a mirror. See your reflection in it. But don't attempt everything at once. First, find that light switch."

He tore a sheet of paper from the pad, folded it twice, and handed it to him.

"Your assignment is in here. Don't read it. Just put it on the night table beside your bed."

Alan took it from his hand.

"Sorry, boychick," Brig said. "I really think your elevator isn't going to the top floor."

They were lunching at The Gavel, the restaurant on the ground floor of their office building. It was crowded and noisy, and now Alan wished it had been too noisy for Brig to hear him.

"When will I learn not to talk to you about this?"

"You can't help yourself," Brig smirked. "You keep hoping I'll approve of this New Age stuff. Validation, that kind of crap."

"So you don't want to hear the rest?"

"Hey, I can't wait to hear the rest! Go on. You were in the driveway of your house, riding a tricycle . . ."

"It was a ten-speed bike. The one I've had in the garage since we moved to Pelham. I rode up to the front door and let myself in. I was surprised to find that the front hallway was dark. Pitch black. I felt—frightened. For a moment, I didn't want to go inside. But I forced myself. I remember saying it out loud. I've got to find the light switch."

"Just like the doctor ordered, right?" Brig put his sandwich

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down, interested in spite of himself.

"It was almost ten days, ten nights I should say, after I saw Rackley, after he gave me that note. In fact, it wasn't night at all. It was Sunday afternoon. I needed a nap."

"So go on. The hallway was dark, and you remembered being told to find the switch."

"Yes."

"Dummy," Brig said. "What else would you do in a dark room?"

"That's right. It's logical. How many 'logical' dreams have you had, Brig? I put my left hand into the room and fumbled around until my hand touched the switch on the wall. I flipped it and the lights went on."

"Big damned surprise, huh?"

"No surprise. That was the surprise. No surprise. And then, at the end of the hallway, I saw the mirror."

"The one in your hallway. The one that's always there. Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"I didn't see my reflection," Alan said. "I woke up before I could try. I was shivering. The bedroom was cold, but not cold enough to give me the shakes. I knew I had been controlling my dream, just like Rackley thought I could. I found the light switch. I saw the mirror."

"But no reflection. Maybe you didn't have one, like Dracula."

"I didn't have time to look. Something woke me, church bells or something. I sat up in bed and saw the note Rackley gave me. I decided to open it. It was blank."

"What was the gag?"

"I don't know."

"Psychology," Rackley smiled. "A little simple psychology. You assumed you had my instructions. Written instructions usually seem more authoritative."

"Whatever it was, it worked. I found the light switch. The light switch and the mirror."

"I'm pleased. You're an apt pupil."

"I'm not talking about that Sunday afternoon nap," Alan said, moistening his lips. "I'm talking about last night. I was tired. I was working late at the office on a difficult brief. Had my dinner in the small conference room. Had pizza, very spicy, thought sure I'd be kept awake by indigestion. But I wasn't. I fell asleep immediately. Didn't even have time to think about dream control. But I had a dream just the same."

Rackley was staring at him.

"The same dream? The light switch, the mirror?"

"Not exactly the same. No bicycle this time. I was in the dark hallway. I was looking for the light switch. I found it, just as I did the first time. Then I turned and looked for the mirror. I remem-

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ber telling myself to look for the mirror. Not to wake up."

"And then?"

"I walked up to the mirror and saw my reflection. I touched my face, as if to make sure it was me. I think I said something, but I don't remember what."

"What else did you see in the mirror?" Rackley asked.

"Nothing. Just my reflection."

"You said it was in your front hallway. Doesn't that mean there might have been a reflection of the stairs?"

Alan leaned back.

"I suppose I did see the stairs. Just the bottom steps. But I didn't see Anne. Not the way she was that night. So the dream doesn't qualify as a nightmare, does it?"

Rackley pulled at his moustache.

"Now I wish I had given you the rest of the instructions. The most important one."

"Tell me now! I'm sure I can go back there. I'm positive! What do I do, after the mirror?"

"It's going to sound difficult, but it isn't. In dreams, the impossible is often easier to realize than the mundane. I want you to look in that mirror and pass through to the other side."

"Are you serious? You mean like Alice?"

Rackley smiled. "I have a feeling that Lewis Carroll had the same gift. What is *Alice in Wonderland* if not a lucid dream? One he controlled by putting it on paper."

"And you really expect me to walk through the glass and into the other side of the mirror?"

"There's no reason you can't do it. Everything is permissible in a dream. All things are possible. You can walk through the mirror and see everything in that room from that new perspective. Will you try?"

"Is it important?"

"If you want to learn to control your dreams, yes."

"All right," Alan said. "I'll try."

He drove up to the front entrance, the gravel crunching under his tires. For a moment, he couldn't find the handle of the door until he realized that it wasn't the Lexus he was driving, it was his old Mustang, the one he had in college. Then he had trouble letting himself into the house. There were too many keys on his chain, and it took him several tries to find the one that opened the door. Of course, the hallway was dark, but he knew where the switch was by now. The light was dimmer than usual, and he said the word "cortex" aloud. He went to the mirror. His face looked ghostly. He moved closer, and tried to see the stairs. He counted one, two, three, four carpeted steps. Was there something more? Was that a

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hand he saw? A woman's hand? He moved closer to the mirror. He felt its cold against his brow. It was time to go through. Then he was on the other side. The stairs looked different. The curving banister was on the left. He saw Anne. Her twisted, broken body, legs and arms at impossible angles, her face hidden by a cascade of golden hair. Then he looked up at the top of the stairs, to the small hallway that led to their bedroom. Someone was standing there.

"You saw this person?" Rackley asked.

"Not the face, no," Alan said.

"It was a man."

"Yes. It was a man. Just standing there, not moving. What I saw was the bottom of his legs, his polished shoes, his trousers. They were dove gray. Their crease was like the edge of a knife."

"You knew who it was?"

"Yes."

"Your friend Brigham."

"Yes."

"And what went through your mind when you saw him?"

"I remembered the first time we met on the golf course. The foursome. Brig and Teri and Anne and me. I didn't realize that Teri was supposed to be my date, that Brig was with Anne. They hardly spoke to each other. I learned later they had quarreled, that they were all through. When I called Anne two days later, asked her to dinner, she said yes. She didn't mention Brig. It was a long time before I realized they had any kind of past together. But last night, I realized that there might have been a present."

"You can't be certain of that," Rackley said carefully. "Remember what I said. Dreams don't inform, they don't predict."

"It was Brig," Alan said.

It was only the second time Alan had visited Brig in his loft apartment in Soho. The first time had been at a party, Brig celebrating his election to partnership. Before Teri, before Anne. Lots of pretty paralegals, too much whiskey, too much loud music. Now the big room was quiet. Ice cubes tinkled loudly in the glass Brig handed him. Single malt Scotch. Alan took the drink but left it untouched.

"You were saying what?" Brig smiled.

"You and Anne. That's why Teri divorced you. You couldn't forget Anne, even after she forgot you." Alan sat down on a leather ottoman. "I think she did forget you, Brig. I have to believe that. No matter how much you tried to get her back. I'll go on believing that for the rest of my life."

"Fine," Brig said. "Fine, fine. You do that, Alan."

"You were there the night of the accident. Anne didn't want to see you. She told you to leave, but you wouldn't. She turned and

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went upstairs to our bedroom, slammed the door shut. You followed her. You went inside, maybe you grappled with her, I don't know. Whatever it was, she tried to get away. She raced down the stairs again. She was in too much of a hurry. She slipped. She fell. She broke her neck at the bottom of the stairs, and then you went home. Isn't that what happened?"

"If I told you you're wrong, would you believe me?"

"I'm not wrong," Alan said.

He removed the pistol from his pocket, the one he had bought for Anne to help secure her lonely nights. Not trusting the small caliber, he pressed the gun into Brig's chest and fired four times, until he was sure his heart was stopped.

"And how did you feel afterwards?" Rackley asked.

"Satisfied," Alan said. "Or at least calm. I was in control of my feelings, something I haven't been for a long time. I don't mean dream control, I mean waking control."

"Yes," Rackley said. "I understand."

"I guess this will be our last session," Alan said. "I'm moving to L. A. next week. I've only got two, three clients here, and Brig can handle them."

"You never told him about your last dream?"

"No," Alan said. He went to the door and looked back at Rackley with a smile. "Pleasant dreams," he said. ●

"Stan, are you sure this is going to work?"

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BY ROBERT BARNARD

The Prized Gentleman
BY RICK RIORDAN

A Kind of Culling
BY GWEN MOFFAT

Night Shift
BY MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

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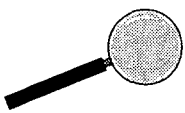

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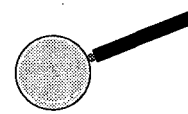

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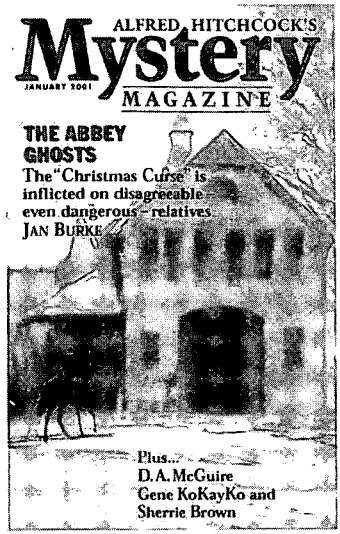

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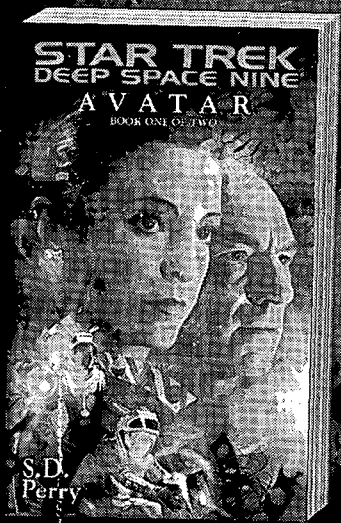

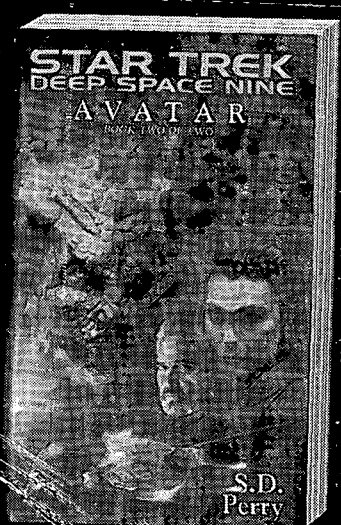

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